FENG YU NIE
MISTAKENLY SAVING the VILLAIN
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MISTAKENLY
SAVING the VILLAIN
NOVEL
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MISTAKENLY SAVING the VILLAIN

NOVEL

1

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Mistakenly Saving the Villain (Novel) Vol. 1

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Chapter 1

SONG QINGSHI DIED.

After he died, he found himself in a strange space occupied only by a flashing red orb.

The orb claimed to be a transmigration system from an extra-dimensional world. Readers of the xianxia novel *Suffering of the Seas, Hatred for the Skies* were united in ire about the suffering of the male lead, which had caused problems to appear in the world of the book. The system needed an experienced romantic, someone who was flexible and studied in common plot points, to fix this mess. He must salve the male lead's heart and soul to grant the readers' wishes: reverse the lead's misfortunes, love him, dote on him, and above all, give him the happiest life possible. Plus, ■■■■■■■.

The system's information came in pieces. Everything inside the ■■ contained indecipherable, alien text.

In life, Song Qingshi had suffered from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, the fatal neurodegenerative disease also known as ALS. He dedicated himself to studying medicine in search of a cure. The hours he might have wasted on reading novels, he spent immersed in research or conducting countless experiments.

His romantic resume was a blank sheet of paper. He was attractive, clever, and polite, but because of his health issues, even the toughest guys at his school lavished him with fatherly attention—never mind the girls, who were naturally inclined to fuss over him. Their overwhelming care and affection smothered any possible crush, and instead he developed a mild case of social anxiety, to the point where he dreaded talking to strangers.

Frankly, Song Qingshi did not fit the bill at all.

He really didn't know why the system had selected him. It seemed a waste of all the Marxist philosophy he'd memorized. Still, even working from incomplete information, he deduced that if he accepted the task the

system would send him into the world of the book, give him a healthy body, and let him live again.

Delirious joy struck him at this realization. A healthy body was his most desperate wish. If the system had demanded he brave the fires of hell, he would've accepted the offer without complaint, so taking care of someone presented no challenge. He allowed himself a moment to consider what to say—then abandoned his conscience and lied for the first time in his life.

"I've read thousands of novels and remember every word. My knowledge of medicine and nursing is vast and I've even taken an elective in psychology. I can treat all of the main character's physical and mental problems. And I-I have tons of romantic experience! I *love* talking to people. I-I'll definitely complete the task!"

He would have blushed if souls had blood.

The system didn't detect Song Qingshi's guilt. Once it confirmed his identity, it beamed a sequence of garbled text and unorganized data directly into his brain. Waves of pain assaulted him. Then the system sounded a piercing alarm. The stream of information cut out, and Song Qingshi's consciousness plunged into darkness. His soul drifted toward a spot of bright, white light…

When Song Qingshi woke up, he found himself lying in a forest, surrounded by the soft fragrance of medicinal herbs. Squinting, he looked up at the brilliant blue sky. A beautiful golden bird soared overhead and let out a clear cry. Countless immortal beasts darted after its long, trailing tail.

Was this the world inside the book?

It felt too real…

A breeze blew through the forest, shaking cold dew from the trees. A drop landed on the pale tip of his finger. With a chill, the memories from this body flooded his brain, mingling with his soul. This body was also called Song Qingshi. He was the master of the Medicine King's Valley and the most talented doctor and apothecary of the immortal realm. He could resurrect the dead, reanimate skeletons, and brew elixirs coveted by cultivators everywhere.

But the Medicine King had an odd personality. He rarely left his valley, had no friends, and showed no interest in anything but medicine and elixirs. When patients sought his help, he treated them only when he felt inclined rather than according to their status. On a good day, he helped even the lowliest beggars on the street, but if his mood spoiled, his patients served as fertilizer in his herb garden. He even tested his medicines out on patients and could be incredibly cruel. Nevertheless, the other sects feared his yuanying-level cultivation and expertise with poisons, so they didn't provoke him—they just called him a weirdo behind his back.

Immortals lived a long time, and this body had committed centuries to memory. Before Song Qingshi's brain had finished downloading his full history, the system's feed interrupted with blocks of corrupted text. New data shredded his original memories. Song Qingshi buffered for a while before he managed to collect himself.

He realized he was standing on Golden Phoenix Mountain, renowned as the most luxurious estate in the immortal realm. They raised precious and rare beasts here, and also kept countless beautiful concubines. The leader of Golden Phoenix Mountain, Jin Feiren, was a powerful yuanying cultivator and an infamous flirt. As loose with his money as he was with his affection, he had plenty of friends and a reputation across the immortal and demon realms.

Recently, after acquiring a *vessel* he quite liked, Jin Feiren had announced a banquet. He prepared a wealth of new vessels to give away, and invited every cultivator with a mutual appreciation. As a result, many guests attended.

The original Song Qingshi maintained a chilly disposition and cared only for his craft. Matters between men and women had never concerned him, but Master Jin had offered to swap a thousand-year-old snow ginseng for a batch of his elixirs. This body's owner needed to replenish his stocks of snow ginseng, so he'd come for practicality's sake.

Snow ginseng grew in the secret realm atop the Jin family's snowy mountain. In order to keep it at peak freshness, one had to preserve it a specific way, so Song Qingshi had come to pick it himself. The banquet just so happened to be at the same time. Master Jin had harried Song Qingshi with constant invitations, trying to curry favor with him. In the end, he

relented. Master Jin, delighted, swore to gift him a number of top-quality vessels.

And then the new Song Qingshi was sent here by the system…

What was a vessel, anyway?

Song Qingshi scrutinized the original's memory and found all kinds of jars, vases, pots, and other cauldrons and vessels, but nothing felt quite right. Master Jin cultivated with the sword, so he wouldn't have any interest in elixirs.

Song Qingshi wanted to ask the system, but it seemed to have crashed and disappeared. He'd received no actual information on the plot of the novel. The cast of characters listed was almost total gibberish and didn't even introduce the protagonist. In a daze, Song Qingshi mentally sifted through what was available to him until he stumbled on a few descriptors in the novel's short summary: *superb body, extraordinary beauty, tricks and steals, slave,* ■■, ■■, ■■*ed.* A single legible word followed that: *banquet*.

An avid reader of transmigration novels would have immediately picked up on the problem.

However, Song Qingshi thought nothing of it. He assumed the system had encountered an error, and now it would test his reading comprehension. Song Qingshi was used to being tested. When he started a new research project with his professors, they often had no leads at all. They had to refine the experiment variable by variable and reach a result through trial and error. In the end, the answer might not even be what they hoped to observe.

Drug companies invested billions in research; students of science spent dozens of years on it. Their life's work might not have passed clinical trials by the time their hair had turned white. Drug researchers were strong individuals who persevered through any battle and defeat.

Overachiever Song refused to cower! Professor System could not give him an impossible question. He would find the right answer and avoid disappointing his teacher!

Song Qingshi immediately found the key to everything: The male lead would appear at the banquet. He possessed an excellent body, extraordinary beauty, and had languished in slavery. Song Qingshi just

needed to whisk the man away, shower him with care, heal his mental and physical traumas, and secure his happiness.

Now that he'd figured out his general direction, Song Qingshi just needed the banquet to start.

Gradually, his spiritual awareness was getting clearer and clearer. Once his soul and body united, they moved nimbly together. He carefully sat up and removed a shoe. Lifting his foot, he tried to flex the muscles that had stiffened over the course of his illness. Each of his pale, round toes wriggled happily.

Song Qingshi stood up and staggered forward. Step by step, he remembered how his feet should fall, and his gait gradually became smoother.

Soft grass and wet dirt caressed his feet.

Outside of the forest, he found a small, quiet river. He stepped into it and splashed his face with cool water. This really proved he wasn't dreaming.

Joyful tears rolled down his cheeks, flooding over his palms without stopping. The water in the river stilled, revealing the reflection of a young man—him.

Song Qingshi gasped. The system had given him a body similar to how he'd looked in high school: average height and lean. Layered spiritual robes made from snowy-white cloud silk covered him from head to toe. At first glance, it seemed impossible his frame could support the fabric's weight.

He wore his soft, delicate hair pinned in a simple updo, and a few stray strands had escaped. Cultivation lent him a new delicacy: His skin was pale, his gaze clear, and because he was constantly daydreaming about research, he seemed a little lost and soft, like he could be easily tricked. That look had led plenty poor souls who thought to take advantage of the original Song Qingshi right into his compost heap.

After Song Qingshi exhausted his emotions, his eyes were red from crying. Embarrassed, he bent to wash the tear tracks from his face with a splash of water. However, the quiet chime of a bell and a snicker from behind him gave him pause.

“It’s no use killing yourself. You’ll just suffer needlessly. If you don’t believe me, go on. Try drowning, see if you succeed.”

Song Qingshi spun around, startled, only to be faced with an unmatched beauty.

A young man in red stood beneath the clouds of peach blossoms that covered the trees. How long had he watched Song Qingshi bawl? The youth looked like a portrait painted with brilliant pigments and dark inks, all the beauty in the world contained in a frame. He had jade-like skin, but his most beautiful feature was his captivating dark-gold eyes, fringed with crow-black, feathery lashes. He would’ve looked righteous and majestic as a phoenix in flight but for the bright red mole beneath the corner of his left eye. That spot tainted his virtuousness, smashed through his majesty, and dragged the phoenix down to earth. Few could resist the seductive charm of beauty stained with desire.

His long hair, slightly curled at the ends, was unbound and fell to his waist. He was barefoot. In fact, he only wore a red mermaid-silk robe. The almost liquid fabric was wrapped tightly around him so it revealed nothing, but with one tug of the golden ribbon at his waist it would slither off and expose his beauty.

Song Qingshi had no such intention, but because he had been caught crying, his anxiety peaked. He gathered his courage.

“I-I was just—” he stuttered.

His hesitation only confirmed the red-robed beauty’s suspicion.

Every cultivator had spiritual powers and heightened senses. They could detect the movement of a blade of grass in the breeze, and the prowling of the dangerous, fierce beasts throughout the immortal realm. Even the lowest-level cultivator would have heard the footsteps of a mortal, especially one wearing a bell. If a cultivator at the yuanying level extended their spiritual senses, they’d detect every critter on the mountain down to an ant.

The only exception was Song Qingshi, who’d just arrived via transmigration. When it came to understanding spiritual powers or even this world, he was uniquely hopeless.

The red-robed beauty assumed Song Qingshi was also a mortal, and beautiful mortals lived on Golden Phoenix Mountain for a single purpose.

“Are you a new slave?” he asked, certain of the answer.

Song Qingshi gawped without comprehension. He was about to reply when his gaze landed again on the beauty’s body. He seemed to have some unusual wounds. Song Qingshi couldn’t help but peek at them. What could have inflicted them?

The beauty’s gentle smile betrayed no irritation, but he grew spiteful under Song Qingshi’s inspection. “Stop staring. You’ll get your own soon,” he said sincerely.

Song Qingshi had been sheltered before his transmigration. He’d never faced such ill intent, so he could not detect it. He only found it a little peculiar.

“Thank you,” he said politely.

The beauty sputtered, then stood there for a while, appraising Song Qingshi. He concluded that Song Qingshi was stupid but unsullied—someone with an innocence that came from never experiencing hell.

The flames the beauty had experienced had hardened his heart, yet he still felt a flicker of pity.

“After tonight, you’ll know that death is a luxury,” he said, his anger dissipating. He looked askance at the cool, flowing water. “I tried to kill myself so many times, when I first came here. It’s useless. We’re slaves. Once we’re branded with the life seal, even our souls belong to our masters. If they forbid it, we can’t decide our own deaths…”

The beauty fell silent for a long time before he reached out slowly and stroked Song Qingshi’s hair. It was soft, like a little animal’s.

Song Qingshi resisted the urge to ask about the rope marks circling the beauty’s pale wrists, realizing this was something he wouldn’t want to be asked about.

The beauty’s fingertips slid from Song Qingshi’s hair to rest on his cheek. At the sight of Song Qingshi’s confused expression, the beauty paused, then reluctantly lowered his hand. No warning could prepare this

innocent for the endless nightmare before him. A moment of naivety bought a little more happiness.

Finally, the beauty sighed. “You’re very pretty. I’m sorry. The lovelier you are, the longer it takes for you to go free…”

“What do you mean, ‘free’?”

“You’ll know soon.” Relaxing, the beauty glanced around at their surroundings, then tapped his lip. A moment later, he whispered, “Tonight, *I’ll* be free.”

He turned away with a laugh, the crisp, pleasant sounds of chimes following behind him. His steps were a little unstable, like he was a mermaid with new legs who trod on the edge of a knife with each movement. A pair of filigreed gold ankle cuffs decorated with dainty bells peeked out from under the hem of his robe. He jingled as he walked. A long, thin, golden chain connected the cuffs, like he was a captured bird. The chain dragged over the grass, trailing droplets of blood on the lush green.

Song Qingshi quashed his anxiety and called out to the departing beauty. “Are you injured? I-I know medicine. Do you want me to help you?”

The beauty turned back, considered him for a moment, then broke out into a smile. This time, sincerity illuminated his eyes. His beauty dazzled, blinding as the golden sun piercing through layers of clouds. He shook his head at Song Qingshi, and wished him well.

“I hope you have better luck than I tonight.”

He left. The light in his eyes dwindled as though it had never dawned at all, leaving only impenetrable, dark clouds.

After living in this nightmare for many years, he had learned not to trust in good intentions or cherish a sliver of kindness.

He paced in his cage without rest, dragging his painful fetters behind him in solitude.

Chapter 2

OVERACHIEVER SONG sat in the examination room hanging his head, his mind completely blank. This banquet scared him far more than pure mathematics. At least when he was being tested on Goldbach's conjecture, he didn't panic.

Golden Phoenix Mountain's Langgan Stage brimmed over with opulence. Beautiful women and children soared and danced in the heights above. Guests arrived with beauties on each arm, and both raucous laughter and vulgar chatter filled the air.

Song Qingshi silently recited lessons on human anatomy, physical hygiene, and the husbandry of lab mice in his head before he regained the composure a gifted medical student should display. This banquet was nothing compared to the tragic loss of all his mice after three years of care.

The original Song Qingshi cultivated two types of divine fire: He created his elixirs with the blaze of the red lotus and killed with the flames of the underworld.

Song Qingshi called forth the latter and donned a cold, aloof expression. He let the flames dance between his fingertips, shaping them as he pleased.

The other guests avoided this fiery display, taking it as an indication of his mood. Even the servant girls dared not approach, lest he turn the fire of death on them in anger.

Every sect relied on the strength of grand masters who had cultivated to the fenshen or heti stage. They rarely showed their faces, which meant yuanying cultivators were usually the most powerful people around and commanded respect. Besides, cultivation was a treacherous path. None were above needing a doctor at some point, so no immortal or demonic cultivator took umbrage at the Medicine King's eccentricities or dared to provoke him.

With his display, Song Qingshi had succeeded in creating a refuge for himself, repelling cultivators who hoped to toady up to him. Next, he

expanded his spiritual senses to cover every beauty at the banquet. He scrutinized them in search of the male lead.

Tastes in beauty vary, and Song Qingshi didn't really trust his own. Each individual stunned him, regardless of gender, to the point where the options overwhelmed him. They were *all* pretty! Even the servant girls pouring water possessed a charm greater than celebrities on TV. He couldn't possibly determine if one rose above the rest.

But an overachiever never admits defeat!

Song Qingshi tried to eliminate some of the prospects. He knew the main character was a man, so he stopped considering women. Then he listed his observations to himself, sought supporting evidence, formed a hypothesis, and slowly cut anyone who didn't fit the criteria.

The Blood Demon Sect leader had brought a pair of gorgeous twin brothers. They oozed feminine charm and seemed as gentle as water. Together, they floated about like two lotus blossoms on one stem.

There was only one main character. Eliminated.

The Dragon Tiger Sect leader had brought a darling young man who spoke like a cute child and clung to him constantly, whining the whole time. The sect leader doted on him, indulging each whim. He fed the youth precious, divine fruits and kept calling him "baby."

The main character's life was a tragedy. Eliminated.

A monk from the north had brought a handsome man in black iron chains. His prisoner stumbled around as though he obeyed the monk's every command but carried himself with the unrestrained pride of a captive eagle desperately flapping its wings and straining to escape.

The main character was a beautiful man and wouldn't be so strong-willed. Eliminated.

As the night dragged on, the celestial music grew sultry and sensual. Guests abandoned the dining area with their companions, relinquishing all modesty.

Meanwhile, Song Qingshi feared that witnessing intimacy between other people would strike him blind. He narrowed the focus of his spiritual

senses to the banquet hall, where he heard the monk displaying his captive to the young master of the Hidden Moon Sect.

“He was a famous general in the mortal realm. After being defeated and captured, he was sold to me. He’s proud to the bone and won’t bow at all, but it makes him a delight to torture.”

“Arrogance and obedience are attractive in their own ways,” said the young master. He smiled and pushed a soft, delicate fox yao forward. “Do you want to trade?”

The monk hesitated, and the young master fixed the fox yao with a look.

“Please spare me some of your affections,” the yao begged, pressing himself against the monk’s chest. “This slave loves strong bodies like yours.”

The fox yao’s salacious words inflamed the monk’s passions, so he passed the chains over to the young master and left with the fox yao. The young master of the Hidden Moon Sect yanked the chains he now held and drove the despondent man to a quiet corner of the garden with the help of a steel whip.

Plenty of similar situations were taking place throughout the banquet with no concern spared for these poor, tragic beauties.

From his body’s memories, Song Qingshi learned that the mortal realm contained trifling amounts of spiritual energy. Mortals lived a brief time, and if they had the potential to cultivate, they could only strive for a basic foundation. Some kindhearted cultivators would accept mortal disciples and give them a chance at immortality. Ten thousand years ago, a mortal named Mo Yuan had unmatched talent and managed to cultivate to the yuanying stage by means of the sword. He eventually created a new style of swordplay and was evenly matched against fenshen-level cultivators. As a result, he claimed the title of sword master.

The path of cultivation waged war against the heavens. Every step was difficult, and when someone failed their tribulation, it went unremarked. People stole and murdered without reason. No moral or ethical measure applied—instead, the greatest sin was weakness. Thus, cultivators

toyed with the lives of mortals like they were ants, to dispose of as they pleased.

Though the sword master Mo Yuan had the heart to care for mortals, all he could do was lay down the rule that once a mortal established a spiritual foundation, they had earned emancipation and were considered a cultivator. However, the demon sects and other unorthodox cultivators did not observe this edict. Any cultivators who ended up in their hands would suffer right alongside weak mortals, subject to deeds so evil they defied description.

And what of Golden Phoenix Mountain? It was a well-known sect in the immortal realm. Every slave they owned was a mortal they had purchased legally.

No matter how much Song Qingshi hated what he saw around him, he couldn't interfere. He was relieved the system hadn't assigned him the role of a mortal. Otherwise, he wouldn't have survived past chapter two, never mind saved the main character.

Good thing this world wasn't real.

Novels were all immoral and improper! Textbooks were the only virtuous path! His professors' mandate to confiscate his female upperclassmen's novels was one he entirely agreed with. Had he lived to become a professor, he would've forbidden novels in case reading them corrupted students' values!

Song Qingshi sighed quietly.

Suddenly, he heard cursing from the garden. The young master of the Hidden Moon Sect returned with an ugly expression, dragging the stubborn man's corpse. His ripped clothes revealed wounds: He had pierced his own throat with a concealed silver chopstick. The chopstick was pure silver, an unlikely tool for suicide, and it must have taken all his strength to succeed. It was clear how determined he'd been.

The other guests tittered at the young master's failure to control a mere mortal.

At this commotion, the monk threw aside the fox yao and rushed over. On seeing that the man he'd brought was dead, his gaze went cold and

furious. The young master, however, was even angrier. He flipped the corpse over, revealing his back covered in whip marks.

“Why doesn’t your slave have a life seal? He managed to kill himself!”

“What’s that? Some newfangled thing you Zhongzhou people invented?” the monk asked, bewildered.

The cultivators delighted in his ignorance, commenting that the north really was a savage land if it lacked something as basic as a life seal. The monk had no idea what they meant, but the young master’s anger had dissipated. He impatiently took the monk by the shoulders.

“The life seal is something the Huanxi-xianzun[1] created. A master brands their slave with the seal so the slave’s body and soul are under the master’s control. The slave is unable to die without permission!”

This sounded important. Song Qingshi focused his spiritual senses.

The young master removed a red bead from his pouch. With a single thought, he rolled the bead around in his hand. The fox yao, who had been standing next to the monk, knelt down on the ground and barked like a dog.

The monk waved his hand, unimpressed. “Such obedience is only fun once in a while. You’d get bored in a few days, using that thing.”

“There’s plenty of applications. I can’t explain them all to you. You simply must try it yourself.” The young master ended the spell on the bead. The fox yao had long since grown accustomed to such humiliations in front of a crowd. Soon his blush faded, and he stood behind his master, head bowed.

“The most important thing,” the young master continued patiently, seeing that the monk did not yet understand, “is that unless you allow it, your slave cannot die. If you had branded your slave with this seal, forbidden him to commit suicide, then prolonged the torture to spite his pride, wouldn’t you have had more fun?”

With new comprehension, the monk nodded in agreement.

“I killed your toy, so I owe you one,” the young master added. “You can take this and study the seal in detail. You’ll definitely enjoy it.” He wiped the bead clean of his spiritual senses and tossed it to the monk.

“The people of Zhongzhou sure are forthright,” the monk exclaimed, delighted. “I, the Black Eagle Dharma King, have decided to be your friend!”

The fox yao paled. He stared at his former owner like he wanted nothing more than to beg, but in the end he said nothing. This clouded pearl—this smashed jewel—followed the monk with tears in his eyes.

At last, the extravagant, decadent banquet had reached its climax.

Disciples of Golden Phoenix Mountain dimmed the glow of the luminous pearls lighting the hall. Darkness engulfed Langgan Stage.

The guests looked up in astonishment as fireworks wrought from spiritual power streaked through the dark. They exploded, revealing a dancing, glittering phoenix, a signal that the real attraction had begun. Jin Feiren raised his cup, inviting his guests to do the same.

The dancing phoenix entranced Song Qingshi, who stared up at it for a while. Then he realized a white-robed youth had appeared next to Jin Feiren. The youth was clean and pretty, like the jade green bamboo growing on the mountain, or the bright moon in the sky. When he looked down, it was like his brows were covered in an icy layer of frost. His hair flowed like a waterfall and was held up with only a single ribbon. He wore no other adornments, but he easily captured everyone’s gaze, and many eyes lingered on him.

The tall, handsome sect leader tickled the youth’s palm. In a soft voice, the former gifted the latter precious artifacts in an attempt to provoke a smile. The youth looked away. No matter how the sect leader coaxed, he wouldn’t spare Jin Feiren a single glance.

With one hand, Jin Feiren forced the youth to look at him, and used the other to jerk his wrists behind his back. The boy struggled in pain until Jin Feiren let go with a smile and leaned in close to whisper, “Do you want to learn the rules or not?”

The youth froze. He stopped struggling, lowered his head, and obediently sat at Jin Feiren’s side.

Was *this* the main character?

Song Qingshi watched for a long time before he finally managed to suppress his fear. He'd just begun to approach Jin Feiren when the sect leader's close confidant, Lingbao-xianzun, cut in.

"Is this your newest toy?" he asked. "A pure yin water elemental! Why don't you give him to me?"

"A toy, perhaps, but I'm awfully fond of him," Jin Feiren said with a smile. He glanced at the youth's embarrassed, indignant expression and pinched him. "I'd rather not hand him off. I'll give you some top-quality product later. They're darling things, just recently branded. They're clean and excellent for dual cultivation."

Song Qingshi had never heard so much lewdness in his entire life! In one evening, he'd learned everything he needed to know about these slaves, and everything he didn't.

Watching Jin Feiren pour wine for the youth, Song Qingshi wondered if he had found the main character. Though the white-robed boy seemed more eye-catching than anyone else here, the system had ordered Song Qingshi to rescue the main character from a tragic life. But Jin Feiren doted on the youth. Surely every beauty at this banquet had suffered more than him…

Song Qingshi's head ached.

At that moment, the phoenix concluded its dance in the banquet hall. It descended in a flash of light.

As the light dimmed, a huge, carved gold bird perch appeared on Langgan Stage. Upon the perch sat a devastating vision of beauty.

Jewel-encrusted gold cuffs circled his pale, trim ankles. Thin golden chains tethered him to either end of the perch. One could catch faint glimpses of his nakedness beneath the swath of nearly transparent, embellished gauze, covered in gold and jewels. He wore a long skirt of gold and red feathers layered to look like a phoenix's tail. His gently curled hair was unbound and strewn with bright pearls made from mermaid tears. The risqué brand on his back was hidden beneath his hair, but it peeked out between the strands as the wind blew through them. He made for a heavenly sight, like a brilliant phoenix or the mortal realm's finest peony.

His lips parted around the mouthpiece of the jade xiao[2] he held in his hands. His dark-golden eyes seemed to glimmer with a smile as he greeted the audience. Hearts hammered at the tantalizing sight of the small, red mole beneath the corner of his eye. Song Qingshi sat up straighter, recognizing the red-robed beauty who'd found him by the river.

The beauty's gaze swept over Song Qingshi and lingered, but he showed no acknowledgment.

Song Qingshi glanced at the white-robed youth to his left, then the red-robed beauty to his right, and panicked. He could not tell who was more beautiful and who was supposed to be the main character: clear, bright moon or brilliant, blooming peony?

Professor System's exam question was way too hard. Was Overachiever Song about to flunk this class?!

Chapter 3

THE RED-ROBED BEAUTY gently parted his lips and blew his first note on the xiao. The lingering emotion in the sound plucked at the audience's hearts, luring them to join him behind the filmy red curtains for a night of passion.

Song Qingshi's mother was a world-renowned pianist. At her encouragement, Song Qingshi pursued an interest in music alongside his otherwise solitary passion for school.

In the last days of his life, he'd lost control of his movements, but his mind remained clear. His mother spent a small fortune installing a studio-quality sound system in his hospital room to play music. Through her connections, she even gathered renowned instrumentalists and principal players to perform a chamber concert for him every day.

Music reeled him back from the brink of despair and soothed his heart. During that unique time, he developed a keen ear for music. He heard the tenderness in a passionate piano piece and the hidden encouragement in a sad, melancholic guzheng[3] piece.

Now, in the sultry wheedling of the xiao, he heard familiar despair—and struggle.

Song Qingshi stared at that dazzling phoenix, unable to look away.

"Song-xianzun, did this slave catch your eye?" Jin Feiren asked, delighted one of his offerings had finally piqued Song Qingshi's interest. "His name is Yue Wuhuan. He's a rare pure wood elemental with exceptional looks. Would you like to try him out?"

"No need," Song Qingshi croaked, avoiding Yue Wuhuan's eye.

"Give it up, friend. The Medicine King's an abstainer. He's never liked such trifles." Lingbao-xianzun pointed at Yue Wuhuan and sighed. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but that's top-grade product from Xie Que, right? He produces the best beauties in all the realm, each more tempting than the last. You guys are obviously close. *You* always get dibs on the finest ones."

“No, no, he’s not close to me.” Jin Feiren waved a hand. “He’s close to three hundred gallons of mermaid tears.”

Lingbao-xianzun burst into laughter. “If money can buy friendship, you’ll never be lonely. Come, come, let’s have a toast in celebration of life.”

Jin Feiren laughed with him and ordered the youth at his side to fill his cup. Then he and Lingbao-xianzun downed their wine.

Lingbao-xianzun had already indulged, so he was now quite tipsy. Leaning against his table, he listened quietly to the xiao and sighed.

“I remember when this beauty first arrived,” he said. “He wouldn’t obey, even under the life seal. Such enticing expressions. But now, he’s totally debauched. It sure is a different flavor. All thanks to your excellent training.”

Jin Feiren shook his head. “It’s terribly disappointing, though. He won’t cry no matter how he’s tormented. He was born without tears, I think. Really spoils the fun.”

“That could be a problem with his lacrimal apparatus,” Song Qingshi responded, unable to help it when he heard the topic turn to his area of expertise.

Jin Feiren paused for a moment. He wanted to befriend Song Qingshi but didn’t know how to respond to his medical jargon. He could only chuckle and change the subject.

“This minx may look seductive, but he used to be an honored prince in the mortal realm. He seemed promising even at eight when Xie Que found him. So Xie Que gifted the emperor an elixir to extend his life. He claimed the emperor’s son had a spiritual affinity, and could he take the boy as a disciple? The emperor was delighted, of course, and handed him over with no complaints.”

A life-extending elixir could only be taken once, lengthening a person’s life to a hundred years. On the other hand, as long as a cultivator established a basic spiritual foundation, they could live at least three hundred years, so they had no need for such things. Life-extending elixirs were usually given to mortals or slaves since their price was quite cheap. Two low-quality spiritual crystals could get you one. As a result, there was

an endless stream of cultivators using bribery to acquire slaves. But none of them compared to Xie Que when it came to quality.

Jin Feiren carried on. “That Xie Que is something else. He accepts human disciples, gains their trust, then tricks them into signing a slave contract. After that, he teaches them cultivation. They blossom into beautiful young men or women, he brands them with the life seal so they stay fresh forever, and off they go to market. Everyone knows he’s taking advantage of a loophole, but they turn a blind eye and silently accept his method of acquiring slaves.”

Song Qingshi was shocked to remember that the original owner of this body had met Xie Que before.

It had been in spring. The original Song Qingshi had turned away guests, lost in contemplation of a new elixir, until Xie Que arrived cradling an unconscious mortal child, no more than eleven or twelve. The boy, a rare pure yang wood elemental, had reached the third level of the initial qi-gathering stage. His extraordinary talents might have shamed the useless novices of famous sects. Xie Que said this was his disciple of around three years, and that when he went up the mountain to train, he had been bitten by a ghost snake. Ghost snakes weren’t deadly, but their venom caused the victim’s face to erupt in ghastly spots, which was how they got their name.

Song Qingshi didn’t treat mortals, but Xie Que begged and wept, swearing he’d pay any price for the health of his dearest disciple. At the time, Song Qingshi was in good humor, and Xie Que’s tearful entreaty tested his patience. Besides, ghost snake venom was quite easy to treat, so eventually he relented. He ordered his servant to give the man two antidote pills and forbade him from crying any longer.

Xie Que stayed at his disciple’s bedside for three days until the danger passed. He worried even after the child woke, fearful of lingering venom. The boy’s spots would fade in time, but Xie Que lingered in the Medicine King’s Valley for a fortnight more until his disciple’s face had fully recovered.

The peach blossoms in Song Qingshi’s medicine garden were in full bloom by then, blotting out the sky like canopies of pink silk. Whenever Song Qingshi felt stumped, he’d sit somewhere high up to look at the

blossoms and think. During that time, he watched a small figure beneath the peach blossoms practice the sword every hour of the day—in the morning, at lunch, and through the evening, as though he'd taken root among the flowers.

Cultivation for a mortal was treacherous as a salmon's journey upstream. Barely anyone succeeded. Xie Que was always at his disciple's side, his face creased with worry. Either he was afraid the boy would dislocate his wrist or that he'd exhaust himself. Thanks to this, the two clashed frequently. The constant squabbling so fascinated Song Qingshi that he eavesdropped with his spiritual senses.

"Shifu, I know I can't compare to the immortals," the child said, "but my royal father once told me the heavens reward diligence, and through diligence I can make up for what I lack. So, I need to practice harder! I can't waste a second."

"That's true," Xie Que said with a frown. "However, you're still sick. I'm afraid you'll injure yourself. Besides, why does it have to be the sword? All the Yan Mountain disciples study music. Wouldn't you like the xiao or qin more?"

"It's true you've taught me the way of music." The child scratched his head, embarrassed. "But I *like* the sword. I want to become like Mo Yuan-xianzun. Don't worry, Shifu, I know all the pieces you taught me, and I can play them better than my peers. This won't hurt my cultivation."

Xie Que had no choice but to give up. "Fine. I'll give you a pair of ice silk gloves. Wear them when you practice, and in the evenings, soak your hands in medicine so they remain soft. There can't be any calluses on them, or it'll affect your future cultivation."

The child cheered, hopping about. "Shifu, you're the best."

"Don't get hurt." Xie Que rapped him on the head. "You frightened me, you rascal. From now on, you must stay on sect grounds and behave. No more running off to the mountains. And you're not allowed to practice day and night like this, in case you damage your eyes."

When the child agreed to everything, Xie Que ruffled his hair and sighed.

"Do you know how important you are to me?"

“I do.” The child looked up earnestly. “I know the immortal realm looks down on mortal cultivators, so they look down on you for taking mortal disciples. I don’t want to embarrass you. I have to cultivate a golden core successfully and prove to everyone my shifu was right!”

Xie Que looked him over without remark, his gaze dark and inscrutable, until the bashful child tugged on his sleeve.

“Wuhuan loves Shifu the most!”

Xie Que’s finger traced the faded outline of the blotches on the child’s face. He stayed silent for a long time. His examination ended on a small red mole at the corner of the boy’s eye. It struck him as beautiful enough to dazzle. At last, he put on a kind smile.

“I love you the most too.”

Chapter 4

SONG QINGSHI FINALLY RECONCILED the child in his memories with the devastating creature atop the gold perch.

A listener clapped and chuckled after hearing Jin Feiren and his friend recount how he'd acquired Yue Wuhuan. "How cruel of Xie Que! Imagine the sight of his little disciple learning the truth."

"It was my eight hundredth birthday that year," said Jin Feiren. He had collected countless beauties since becoming a cultivator, but even now he shivered with delight recalling the day he first possessed Yue Wuhuan. "Everyone wanted to celebrate, so I held a banquet here at Langgan Stage. Xie Que came with Wuhuan after telling the boy that he'd study the sword here. The dear child was delighted. Xie Que handed me his life pearl so I could inspect my slave in the middle of the party. Wuhuan's expression of disbelief was too cute…"

Jin Feiren mussed the long hair of the white-robed boy beside him, forcing him to look up at the beautiful xiao player on the golden perch. Then he continued recounting the events of the past.

At the time, Yue Wuhuan had just come of age. He wore robes made of yuelan fabric, favored by the disciples of the cultivation sects. A sword hung at his waist, and his hair was done up with a simple white jade ornament. His features were delicate, he smelled pleasant and clean, and his eyes sparkled. He moved with elegance and dignity, so much so that he didn't seem like a mortal at all. Instead, his bearing was better suited for someone from a powerful sect in the immortal realm.

He carefully greeted the elders in attendance one by one. As his voice brimmed with excitement and anticipation, he told Jin Feiren that he'd already reached mid-stage foundation establishment. He swore he'd work hard studying the sword at Golden Phoenix Mountain and not disappoint his teacher. He'd become a powerful cultivator just like Mo Yuan. His audience had laughed—a sound with something lurking behind it. Yue Wuhuan knew then that something was wrong and began to retreat, but Jin Feiren was already on him. He snatched Yue Wuhuan's hand for a rough inspection.

“Such beautiful palms,” he said, chuckling. “They’re not suited for the sword. They’re more suited for pleasing others.”

Yue Wuhuan blanched and struggled to free his hand from Jin Feiren’s grasp.

Jin Feiren let go, then said with a smile, “Xie-xianzhang,[4] since you’ve brought the merchandise, I should at least examine it, no?”

His guests clamored, demanding he examine Yue Wuhuan on the spot.

Yue Wuhuan watched his teacher produce a red bead. With a single thought from Xie Que, Yue Wuhuan’s control of his body deserted him. He tried to stop his trembling hands from reaching to his waist, but they tossed his precious sword aside like rubbish. Next, his belt landed beside it. He shed layer upon layer of fabric until he and his dignity stood bare for everyone to see. In that moment, his tiny dream crumbled to dust.

Langgan Stage fell silent. The stunning view drew every eye in rapture.

Jin Feiren couldn’t help but straighten his back.

Yue Wuhuan struggled against the life seal, aching for death right then and there. He darted his eyes at his teacher in a desperate, silent plea, trying to shape his lips around any word at all. Xie Que approached him with an outstretched, gentling hand and patted him on the head like he would have on any other day.

Then he removed the white jade hair ornament.

It fell to the ground, smashing into pieces. Yue Wuhuan’s wavy hair cascaded down to his waist, veiling the stark red, provocative brand on his pale back. The look of utter desertion in his dark-gold eyes would have spurred anyone to cruelty, and his red mole seized the audience’s desires. The beautiful youth had been defiled: A siren tempting enough to snare the soul had replaced him.

Yue Wuhuan struggled. He hung his head, wanting some small shadow where he could hide.

Xie Que grabbed Yue Wuhuan’s long hair and yanked it back, forcing the humiliated young man to look up so everyone might admire his

devastating beauty.

He smirked. “I’ve always had impeccable taste.”

The music’s mood grew poignant, and the grief behind it deepened.

Song Qingshi’s throat felt stiff. He almost couldn’t breathe. Note by note, he began to understand what Yue Wuhuan meant when they spoke on the riverbank. Song Qingshi remembered his own life before death, locked in the cage of his body. Every day, he screamed himself hoarse in his head, but no one heard his pleas.

Song Qingshi wanted the test to end. He had arrived at an answer: He would save this beautiful, broken bird.

With that, his brain roared into overdrive, straining for a way to rescue Yue Wuhuan.

The song finished. The sounds of the xiao diminished, but the notes seemed to linger still. The heated performance roused the guests’ vigor, and some members of the audience made fools of themselves.

“This is the gift Golden Phoenix Mountain is presenting to you tonight. Please enjoy,” Jin Feiren announced as he stood up.

Song Qingshi glanced at Yue Wuhuan in shock. Yue Wuhuan only raised an eyebrow, as though he’d grown accustomed to such situations. He threw a careless, seductive glance at the cultivator beside him, and one of his shapely calves peeked out from beneath his feathered dress. He jingled the bell on his golden shackles like a gentle song, as though offering a taste to everyone.

Desire overcame the young master of the Hidden Moon Sect, and he snatched at that foot. He wanted to tear the dress from Yue Wuhuan, drag him into the wings, and have his way with him.

There came a sudden, alarmed scream from outside. The servant girls scurried to hide as a spirit tiger broke in, its crimson eyes glimmering. It soon fixed its gaze upon Yue Wuhuan, rumbling continuously, as if it had spotted some delicious prey. But Yue Wuhuan’s own eyes drifted like he had been given some sort of drug. Slowly, he walked toward the tiger, without fear or comprehension.

Lingbao-xianzun hooted. “This is tonight’s program? Pal, you really went all out!”

The guests roared drunkenly in a frenzy of excitement.

The white-robed youth couldn’t bear it any longer and jumped up. “Stop! No! You’ve gone overboard!” he shouted, pushing Jin Feiren aside.

Jin Feiren was perplexed. He had arranged for a spirit tiger to kill a slave as part of tonight’s entertainment, but not one that *mattered*. How could he waste such a precious commodity as Yue Wuhuan? Nevertheless, now that all the guests anticipated such an event, and Yue Wuhuan had indulged them, Jin Feiren couldn’t ruin the mood. Besides, the white-robed youth’s protests were embarrassing him. He scoffed.

“Why can’t I? You’d better pay attention. Disobey me further, and you’ll suffer the same fate.”

Color fled the youth’s face. He opened his mouth, but dared not utter another word.

Seeing Yue Wuhuan approach, the tiger flew into a fervor. It had gone mad, and it lunged with its jaws open. Its fangs tore a long, bloody gash along Yue Wuhuan’s shoulder, and he finally woke from his stupor. He shrank back, but the spirit tiger continued to bite and claw at him, like it wanted to shred this fugitive prey to ribbons.

At last, Song Qingshi’s memory yielded the appropriate attack. He concentrated his flames of the underworld into a needle no wider than a hair, then threw it at the spirit tiger. When it struck, the spirit tiger pulled its head back with a yowl. Instead of piercing its neck, the needle had punctured its leg.

But the deadly poison of the underworld fire quickly spread through the spirit tiger’s body. In an instant, it stiffened and dropped to the floor. The corpse dissolved into a puddle of rotting liquid, then evaporated.

Song Qingshi rushed to the side of Yue Wuhuan, who lay slumped in a pool of blood. Song Qingshi sealed the wound as fast as he could before tapping on a series of pressure points to staunch the bleeding.

Yue Wuhuan trembled in pain and strained for breath. There was blood all over his pretty face, marking him like a fierce ghost. His eyes

expressed no relief or happiness at his rescue, only resentment and despair.

“How could I have been so blind?” he whispered, then passed out.

Song Qingshi tipped an elixir into Yue Wuhuan’s mouth, stabilizing his heart and vitals.

“Song-xianzun, why did you kill my spirit tiger?” Jin Feiren asked, displeased. His precious pet had been extraordinarily intelligent and knew to protect its master. He’d lost an asset more valuable than a slave who bored him.

“I want him,” Song Qingshi said, assuming his predecessor’s cold tone.

“Have you really fallen for this worthless thing?”

“I’d like to experiment on him.”

Song Qingshi wanted to experiment on Yue Wuhuan—with all sorts of miraculous herbs and medicines to restore his original state!

Jin Feiren took Song Qingshi’s misdirection for truth. Wood elementals benefited from a quick recovery, so they made for excellent lab rats. His spirit tiger was dead, no matter whom he blamed for it, and the Medicine King was as unpredictable as the heavens. He might as well do Song Qingshi a favor.

Song Qingshi took a bottle of cultivation pills from his pouch and handed them all to Jin Feiren as compensation. The pills would improve cultivation, and their manufacture was difficult and required rare, expensive ingredients. Plus, pills made by the Medicine King himself were priceless. They were more than enough to make up for the cost of Jin Feiren’s spirit tiger and a boring, half-dead slave who might even slip beyond rescue.

Not realizing any of this, Song Qingshi looked at Jin Feiren, afraid he was still unhappy with the trade. “I’m afraid the tiger was drugged and went feral. It wasn’t in its right mind, so it could not be allowed to live any longer.”

Jin Feiren hurriedly accepted the olive branch. Wiping all traces of himself from Yue Wuhuan’s life bead, he handed it to Song Qingshi. He then thanked Song Qingshi for realizing the threat and killing the spirit tiger

in time before it harmed any guests. Finally, he sealed the deal by ordering someone to find out exactly what had been behind the tiger incident.

Song Qingshi rejected Jin Feiren's offer to send him off with a few more beauties and bade him farewell. He carried the senseless, wounded Yue Wuhuan out of his ornate prison.

There were still many souls left in this hell, unable to escape.

The sounds of pleasure behind Song Qingshi grew distant. He wiped the blood from Yue Wuhuan's face. His thick, crow-feather lashes trembled with the movement of his shuttered eyes, and he looked fragile, yet beautiful.

Song Qingshi gazed down at the figure in his arms. His resolve hardened.

Suddenly, a story his mother had told him as a child came to him:

Tens of thousands of dying fish had washed ashore and lay dying in the shallows. He couldn't save all of them. He could carry only a single fish to sea, returning it to freedom. So why bother?

"Because it matters to that fish."

Chapter 5

READERS FAMILIAR WITH the transmigration genre or novels with systems know that to change a character's fate, one should intervene before the tragedy has occurred. But Song Qingshi thought his task came after the story's conclusion. In his mind, he had to save a main character whose tragic past had already happened. With just one assumption, he had strayed a thousand miles from the objective.

Yue Wuhuan appeared only three times in the original novel: First, when the main character was sold to Golden Phoenix Mountain. He witnessed Yue Wuhuan's humiliation and torment by the guests of Golden Phoenix Mountain, which shattered his illusions about the world. Second, when Yue Wuhuan mocked and humiliated him for his naive aspirations, forcing him to face the harsh reality he was in.

The third time was atop Langgan Stage. Jin Feiren brought Yue Wuhuan out to entertain the guests, but when the spirit tiger mauled the beauty, Jin Feiren concealed the true reason for the attack. He stoked the main character's fear by claiming to have planned the incident, destroying what remained of his self-respect. In the aftermath, the main character yielded entirely to Jin Feiren, who treated him like a toy.

In conclusion, Yue Wuhuan played a bit part with minimal screen time. His purpose was to make an obscene contrast to the main character's perfection. As beautiful as Yue Wuhuan was, how could a dazzling flower about to wilt compare to a pure bud that had yet to bloom?

Given a multiple-choice test, every novel reader would know the correct answer. If the system supervised exams, it'd beat Song Qingshi to death for his stupidity.

Overachiever Song didn't know he was on the wrong course. He rubbed his hands together, brimming with confidence. He'd ace this exam for sure, submitting a perfect score!

On the way back to the Medicine King's Valley, Song Qingshi had finished absorbing his original body's memories. He was now familiar with

all the medical knowledge and elixir-making skills that came with it. The immortal realm had plenty of fantastic magical herbs, drugs, and elixirs—but like traditional Chinese remedies they were known for their effects, not their properties.

Modern medicine had made a systematic study of traditional Chinese medicine so doctors could identify the causal relation between remedy and result and isolate the functional parts of traditional medicine. This knowledge helped create new drugs that were easier to administer and more effective. There was a researcher who'd received a Nobel prize for this type of study, and her work had saved millions of lives.

Like her, Song Qingshi studied modern medicine, and he didn't subscribe to the immortal realm's practices. Very quickly, he concocted several new ideas to reinvigorate the fruitless experiments the original Song Qingshi had been conducting. He would ask the Pavilion of Heavenly Crafts to create approximations of modern scientific instruments. With those, he could analyze this world's drugs for their active ingredients, refine them, study them, and maybe even synthesize them.

Countless possible experiments came to Song Qingshi, who was as happy as a mouse that had fallen in a bag of rice. The Medicine King's Valley held tens of thousands of books, an endless supply of ingredients, and plenty of research funds. He could have kissed the system for bringing him here!

He completely understood why the original Song Qingshi had been such a recluse. Given this wonderland, he'd also swear himself to hermitage for the rest of his life. He could sink deeply into learning and research, offering up his life and soul to his beloved god of medicine. There was no way he was going back!

Song Qingshi looked down at Yue Wuhuan in his arms. The more he stared, the more his fondness grew.

This was who had given him everything! He would do anything in his power to save Yue Wuhuan. Just as Song Qingshi's parents had treated him, he would spoil Yue Wuhuan, dote on him, love him, give him everything good. He'd treat him to the life of a fairy-tale prince!

Song "Fatherly Love" Qingshi's heart brimmed with happiness. Forcing himself to stay calm, he set Yue Wuhuan down in the side hall next

to his own rooms.

He treated Yue Wuhuan like his personal patient. First, he fed Yue Wuhuan medicine from a teapot to replenish his vitals. Then he changed into white robes, made himself a mask, and donned thin gloves made of animal hide. After disinfecting a pair of scissors, he carefully cut off Yue Wuhuan's gauzy robe and feather skirt. He cleaned the wounds before stitching them with delicate, divine-silk thread. Finally, he tied off the ends and attended to Yue Wuhuan's other injuries.

Song Qingshi worked gently and efficiently, barely touching Yue Wuhuan's skin, but his patient was incredibly sensitive. He twitched and moaned a few times during the process—until he passed out again. Taking that as an opportunity, Song Qingshi drew some blood for later analysis and scanned Yue Wuhuan's body with his spiritual senses. Even Song Qingshi, with his mild temperament, couldn't help but curse those responsible for the disastrous state of Yue Wuhuan's dantian and meridians.

Privately, Song Qingshi pondered how to deal with talking to his patient once he woke up. Communicating with strangers was hard for him. He could get by discussing his field of study, but whenever he was chatting with someone casually his mind would jump and his answers never seemed to express what he wanted to say.

Once, he'd been watching a popular idol survival show with a group, and everyone had been debating which idol was god tier. When someone asked whom he would put in that category, he'd very earnestly responded with Asclepius, the god of medicine.

To this day, he couldn't understand why everyone said he'd killed the conversation.

He thought back to his time as a hospital intern before he grew seriously ill. Seeing how he stuttered when talking to patients, his upperclassman had offered some advice.

"Try to get rid of all your emotions. Pretend you're a medical robot. First, make the diagnosis and detailed treatment plan, then recite it with a smile and reassure them at the end."

After hearing such a life hack, Song Qingshi had practiced the routine on cadavers until he could face patients without shaking. The hospital was a

medical facility, and the Medicine King's Valley was also a medical facility. What was the difference, really?

He immediately changed Yue Wuhuan's bed linens for hospital whites, then ordered the servants to contrive some hospital gowns. Once they'd finished, he changed Yue Wuhuan into the garment. A red bracelet tied on his arm indicated he was in critical condition. Finally, Song Qingshi hung a chart and a *Special Care* sign on the bed. With that, his bedside manner recovered and his panic fell away.

He couldn't entrust Yue Wuhuan's care to the servants. No matter how exhausted or filthy it left him, he was meticulous. He bathed Yue Wuhuan multiple times a day, fed him water and medicine, changed the sheets, and dealt with all sorts of bodily functions and stains.

Yue Wuhuan woke three days later, not knowing where he was. Staring at the unfamiliar white curtains above his bed, he lay there in a daze for a long time. It slowly sank in that he was alive, and that he hadn't felt so relaxed in many years.

He closed his eyes, recalling the faint scent of medicine that had woven in and out of his dreams and the pair of gentle hands that had unshackled him. He took a deep breath, not wanting to wake up. He dreaded his return to a never-ending nightmare.

After some time, Yue Wuhuan's eyes flew open. He suddenly remembered where he'd smelled such a scent before. Slowly, he turned to look at the round table beside him, only to find the Medicine King focused on a piece of paper. Scribbled corrections crowded the page, and his brow was furrowed in grim contemplation.

Yue Wuhuan's life bead sat on the silver platter next to him. Clearly, Yue Wuhuan had been given to another customer for their pleasure.

He narrowed his phoenix eyes. He'd heard rumors of the Medicine King's numerous oddities and unusual cruelties, but under the control of the life bead, fear and consent meant nothing. His ruined body wasn't worth cherishing, so what else did he expect? He sighed, gritting his teeth as he struggled to get out of bed, but pain lanced through his shoulder. The world spun, and he fell forward.

Song Qingshi, absorbed in study, only realized his patient was conscious on hearing the noise.

“Get back on the bed! You’re not allowed to get up for ten days!” he scolded, fearing Yue Wuhuan’s wounds had torn open.

This was a tip the head nurse had taught him: It was better to be harsh with stubborn patients.

“Ten days?” Yue Wuhuan reeled in shock. Song Qingshi’s appearance had totally deceived him. After all the customers he’d serviced throughout the years and the indignities he’d endured, he couldn’t see how the man before him could torment him to the point of having to stay in bed for ten days.

Song Qingshi put down his brush and went to pick Yue Wuhuan up.

Yue Wuhuan steeled himself and softly wrapped his arms around Song Qingshi’s neck. His burning fingertips met cool skin, soft and smooth as jade. The clean scent of medicine clung there as it had in his dreams. For a moment, Yue Wuhuan was befuddled, then chided himself for not knowing better.

“Please have mercy, Xianzun,” he murmured breathily, playing his part.

“Don’t worry. I will.” Song Qingshi eased him back into bed, then swaddled him in blankets. “The valley’s damp and chilly. You’re mortal, so be careful not to catch a cold. Don’t stick your hands or feet out of bed, and don’t kick off your blanket.”

Yue Wuhuan had never seen foreplay like this. He felt a little lost.

“You’re a patient now. Let me explain the situation.” Song Qingshi returned to the table, picking up his stack of papers. Nervously, he pushed up his nonexistent glasses and delivered his recitation with a smile.

“Patient Yue Wuhuan.” He spoke in a clipped, formal tone. “You have three avulsions from the right shoulder to the chest, eighteen, fourteen, and twelve centimeters each. The right shoulder is fractured, and there is a rupture to the suprascapular artery. There’s small abrasions to the right elbow, both wrists, the right knee, and both ankles, lacerations on the

buttocks, and evidence of drug use. There's a possibility you've developed a reliance on these drugs. That's all. Do you understand?"

Yue Wuhuan found Song Qingshi's smile uncanny and stiff. Each word plunged him further into confusion, so he just nodded, feigning comprehension.

"Good." Song Qingshi thought his explanation detailed and easy to understand, so he started reciting the preliminary treatment plans. "Your dantian and meridians have been destroyed, and your overall health is severely compromised. We can't use any harsh medicines, so no elixir of rejuvenation, ease-of-breath powder, elixir of all-life, or bone-growth elixir. You need mortal medicines first, then you'll recuperate slowly with the help of a meridian-repair bath. After that, you'll take a rising-dragon elixir and a nine-rotation blood-lotus pill."

Yue Wuhuan finally understood *something*. The immortal realm made common use of elixir of rejuvenation, ease-of-breath powder, and bone-growth elixir. He'd taken them for serious injuries. On the other hand, the rising-dragon and all-life elixirs were priceless. He'd heard once that the master of the Veridian Bead Pavilion had purchased one for his beloved pet.

Yue Wuhuan didn't know what a meridian-repair bath was, but a nine-rotation blood-lotus pill was a treasure beyond compare, made from the thousand-year blood lotus. There were only nine in the world, and most of them grew in parts unknown. The master of Xuanji Palace had ingested just one and broken through to the fenshen level. Seeking one, the masters of the Floating Snow Palace had levied their blades at each other's throats; in the end, the husband slaughtered his own wife for it. Another pill had appeared at the Rare Treasure Pavilion auction, and the master of the East Sea Langya Pavilion won the bid with tens of thousands of spirit crystals. Jin Feiren hadn't attended that auction, which he claimed was one of his biggest regrets. He spoke of it often.

In mortal terms, it was like someone had plucked an anonymous beggar from the gutter and promised him riches like he'd never known: houses wrought of gold, horses carved from jade, wealth only possible in dreams. Finally, he offered the entire country and the emperor's seal. What fool would suffer that lie?

Yue Wuhuan laughed, but his heart iced over. He knew Song Qingshi meant to mock him. He'd met plenty of these fake gentlemen in the past. They offered morsels of kindness, feigned sympathy for the world and everyone in it to coax the slave into obedience. They played at romance but hungered for filth.

"Don't worry," said Song Qingshi. "If you listen to me and follow the treatment plan, you'll get better."

"Of course," Yue Wuhuan drawled. His phoenix eyes shone with a hint of seduction. "This slave will listen to anything…"

"Oh! I almost forgot." Something in Yue Wuhuan's eyes spurred Song Qingshi to action. "This might feel a little uncomfortable, but not for long." He put on his gloves again, picked up a luminous pearl the size of a goose egg that was mounted at one end of a strange tube, and sat on the bed. He leaned over Yue Wuhuan.

Yue Wuhuan affected a self-deprecating smile. He made himself pliant and waited for a new round of torture.

Song Qingshi peeled Yue Wuhuan's eyelids open wide, mumbling as he directed the light here and there. "The lacrimal gland looks fine from the outside, but we should still do a dye test…"

Yue Wuhuan had no idea what to do.

Chapter 6

MY EYEBALLS are about to be plucked out of their sockets. Yue Wuhuan couldn't help shuddering at the thought.

"Are you cold?" Song Qingshi asked, confused, after he finished his examination.

Yue Wuhuan shook his head stiffly.

"We'll leave the treatment until later, then, if your eyes aren't bothering you right now." Song Qingshi would treat Yue Wuhuan's health in order of urgency. He returned to the table, shucked off his gloves, and picked up Yue Wuhuan's life bead. "I found some white powder underneath your nails. My preliminary examination confirms the presence of spring-deer grass and flower of bewitchment, both potent aphrodisiacs. I also found traces of catnip on your skirt. That's why the spirit tiger attacked you at the banquet."

He found out, Yue Wuhuan despaired.

This was the method he'd managed to find that skirted around the life seal's rules: Slaves couldn't commit suicide, and slaves obeyed their master's every command—but masters indulged in their slaves' misery, even to the point of death.

All he could get his hands on were aphrodisiacs. He concentrated their psychedelic properties, then increased the dose until it would've driven even elephants to madness.

He'd carefully calculated the time and coated the aphrodisiac in wax to delay its effect on the tiger. After that, he covered himself in a scent that would attract the spirit tiger. Stimulated by the banquet, the drugged tiger went wild, and Yue Wuhuan made a tempting target. All he did was pretend the aphrodisiac had overcome him and walked toward the tiger instead of fleeing. Assuming Jin Feiren had arranged for a spectacle, the guests met it with thundering applause.

Jin Feiren's pride bruised at the lightest touch, and he favored his new pet now. He would never spoil a good mood on Yue Wuhuan's account.

Yue Wuhuan had carried out his plan, determined to die before it could ever be exposed. He'd fully expected the tiger to lose control and rip him to shreds. At Golden Phoenix Mountain, if a slave was found to be disobedient, they would be severely punished. He had committed the serious crime of plotting against his master…but so what?

Yue Wuhuan's panic slowly faded. He'd suffered every torment known to man when he entered slavery, testing the limits of his resolve and his capacity to heal as a pure wood elemental. He was put in all sorts of humiliating positions until he confessed to being a pathetic, dirty slut, and once that torture lost its novelty they used all sorts of drugs to modify his body so he became incredibly sensitive. Even the touch of fabric chafed against his skin.

Every time he thought he'd reached hell's deepest abyss, he plummeted further. In the end, he realized his despair and resistance only delighted his captors. He gave up struggling or trying to escape, finding it all meaningless. He also stopped trying to escape the life seal alive.

The ruin of his body sickened him. He longed for its destruction. The heavens alone knew that when that spirit tiger ripped into him, he felt only relief, no pain. If the Medicine King dug out his eyes, hacked off his limbs, cast him into a nest of snakes, or fed him to a pack of starving beasts, he would rejoice; no punishment invented yet could hurt him.

Yue Wuhuan dropped his smile and gazed at the life bead coldly. "So you know. What are you going to do now?"

"Someone's trying to harm you!"

Yue Wuhuan nearly missed a breath. Thinking he'd misheard, he muttered, "What?"

Song Qingshi didn't read novels, but he thought his reasoning beyond doubt. According to his female upperclassmen, main characters were good guys because if they were bad, their stories wouldn't meet the requirements for mainland publication. Plus, the system had explained the main character had suffered a terrible fate. His injuries must have also occurred in the original novel.

Drawing on stories Song Qingshi had read in the news, he surmised that someone from Golden Phoenix Mountain envied Yue Wuhuan. Jealous

of the main character’s astonishing beauty and Jin Feiren’s attention, they were out to destroy him. That was why he was pumped so full of drugs!

After thorough contemplation, Songlock Holmeshi arrived at a conclusion: “I suspect whoever helped you get dolled up that day did it. I’ll look into the culprit later, so you can have the justice you deserve.”

Yue Wuhuan felt the corners of his mouth twitch. The almighty Medicine King couldn’t be this stupid. Of course not—he just wanted Yue Wuhuan to underestimate him.

Yue Wuhuan had no idea what expression he should be making in the face of this display. “It’s all right,” he said stiffly, at last.

However, such kindness only lent strength to Song Qingshi’s conviction.

“This is yours. Keep it safe,” he said, thrusting the life bead into Yue Wuhuan’s hand. On holding the bead, Yue Wuhuan realized Song Qingshi held no influence over it.

“I studied it a little,” Song Qingshi explained. “The life seal is a kind of curse. It’s complicated, and there’s no record of how to break it here at the valley. I’ve already sent some servants to the Night Rain Pavilion. The master there said the information’s not expensive, but it is rare, so it’ll take him a few days.”

Yue Wuhuan froze for a long time.

“Your price… What will this cost me?” he croaked.

All his life, people had helped Song Qingshi; all his life, Song Qingshi had tried to help others in turn. No one had ever named a cost, and he had never set a price.

In his eyes, the life seal was a crime against humanity. It was the source of the main character’s pain, like the fetters on a caged bird. He had opened the cage, and now the natural next step was to take off the restraints. It was so obvious it went without saying.

So he made a proposition instead.

“Just focus on recovery and healing.”

A servant entered to say that the pot of medicine in the yard had boiled long enough. Song Qingshi rushed to inspect it in case it hadn’t reached peak potency.

Yue Wuhuan stared at the bead in his hand, his mind in turmoil. In his experience, gifts without a price were the most expensive of all.

Throughout the immortal realm, the Medicine King was famed for his cold, unfeeling disposition. He found compassion alien. What could such a person want from Yue Wuhuan? His body? His life? His soul? Yue Wuhuan thought about it for a long time, until he had to laugh. He clutched the life bead in his fist, deciding to play along. He would venture anything for freedom, even if it meant selling his soul to the devil.

When Song Qingshi returned with the medicine, Yue Wuhuan again contemplated what the other expected or wanted from him. He rearranged his face into a meek, helpless expression, followed by a supplicating glance. With an appropriate amount of gratitude, he allowed Song Qingshi to do whatever he wanted while treating him.

What an obedient patient! He did whatever the doctor requested. If the medicine tasted vile, he’d drink it in one go. If the needles stung, he made no sound. He even offered quiet thanks after his treatment. Song Qingshi felt an immense sense of accomplishment when treating him and wished that all patients would follow doctor’s orders so well.

A pure wood elemental’s ability to heal was truly shocking. Yue Wuhuan’s shoulder scabbed over in five days.

After careful examination, Song Qingshi allowed his patient to leave the bed and perform light exercise. After urging Yue Wuhuan to soak up as much sunlight as possible, Song Qingshi prepared for the next phase of treatment.

The Medicine King—both the original and the current Song Qingshi—didn’t care much for stylish dress, so mermaid and ice silk were rare sights in his valley. The servants had fashioned hospital gowns from ordinary cotton. Any other person would’ve found them comfortable, but they bothered the hypersensitive Yue Wuhuan. He felt each thread like a rasp, so he didn’t stray far from his room and faltered every few steps.

That night, Song Qingshi noticed Yue Wuhuan's unsteady gait and came to take a look. Unexpectedly, when Song Qingshi's fingers lightly brushed Yue Wuhuan's collarbone, the touch aroused a response.

Yue Wuhuan shriveled at Song Qingshi's shocked expression and his clear, kind eyes. An embarrassment Yue Wuhuan thought he'd forgotten washed over him. He lurched away from that gentle pair of hands and curled in a dark corner.

Purity and desire. Cleanliness and filth. The stark contrast between these extremes highlighted the unbearable reality of his situation. Again and again, he repeated to himself what he had come to understand a long time ago: The life seal no longer constrained him, but he couldn't return to the past.

Song Qingshi withdrew his hands. Looking at Yue Wuhuan hiding in the dark, he opened his mouth, but he didn't know what to say.

Yue Wuhuan realized his mistake. After all, Song Qingshi *knew* he was unclean. Trying to hide it would only embarrass him further. He evened out his breathing, then slowly knelt down in the darkness. He smiled up at Song Qingshi and spoke that familiar, humiliating phrase.

"How can I serve you, Xianzun?"

He'd rather debase himself than have it forced on him. No matter what kind of disgrace and degradation he had to suffer, as long as he accepted his shameless, worthless existence, he could cope.

Song Qingshi dropped the bed curtains, covering up the enticing sight within.

Yue Wuhuan's fawning voice went quiet.

"It's late," Song Qingshi said dispassionately. "Patients need to rest."

Yue Wuhuan sat on the bed with a blank expression as he watched the vague silhouette outside put a shutter over the room's luminous pearl and light incense. A faint medicinal scent mixed with agarwood swept over him, calming down his flushed body. He lay down, hugging himself in the empty dark.

He came to the realization that no one would torment him tonight. He no longer had to endure endless pain, nor was he obliged to flatter and obey.

The smell of blood didn’t hang in the air—only a clean, refreshing fragrance. It soothed his ever-vigilant mind. Unable to resist closing his eyes, he was dragged into dreamland.

This time, his dreams didn’t take place in hell. There was only the pleasant scent of the yulan magnolia outside the window of his childhood room…

He relaxed, immersed in sweet, forgotten dreams.

Song Qingshi stood outside the door to Yue Wuhuan’s room for a long time, lost in thought.

Once the soothing incense had done its job, he entered again. He pulled the bed curtains open, holding the luminous pearl aloft. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he expanded his spiritual senses to probe the hurt buried in Yue Wuhuan’s worn, battered body.

Eventually, Song Qingshi concluded his lengthy examination. He gazed at Yue Wuhuan’s face. At rest, the youth demonstrated none of his earlier allure. He slept like a wild cat with his claws tucked away, unguarded, as though he had never felt pain. His mask dropped, revealing his true self.

Free, proud, stubborn…

His life definitely shouldn’t have turned out this way.

Song Qingshi gently tucked the blankets around Yue Wuhuan and smoothed a few stray hairs from his face.

“I will fix you,” Song Qingshi vowed in a quiet voice.

Chapter 7

SONG QINGSHI SPENT THE NIGHT hunting for an ice silk robe until he discovered one in red. He dismantled the decorative spells on it, then handed it to the servants to modify into an inner robe. When that was done, he placed it, along with a new cotton outer robe, at Yue Wuhuan's bedside.

On waking, Yue Wuhuan saw the ice silk inner robe and froze.

"Hurry up! We're starting a new treatment," Song Qingshi called from outside, rushing him.

"Yes, Zunzhu."[5] Yue Wuhuan knew he had a new master. He didn't dare dwell on it and hurried to dress. His clothing felt more comfortable over the silk.

Song Qingshi led him through the hallway to the elixir room next door. This was originally a forbidden area of the Medicine King's Valley, where he conducted experiments on all manner of creatures, humans included. The servants dreaded having to enter. But in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, the new Song Qingshi refused to perform any unethical testing on humans. When he took over the valley, he'd let go of any living experiments he could and had spared the rest any further misery. Then, he converted the elixir room into a place for treatment and moved the specimens and cadavers elsewhere. He'd never relinquish such precious treasures. He'd study them further when he had time.

On the way to the elixir room, Yue Wuhuan caught sympathetic looks from more than one servant and grew uneasy. Entering the room, he saw Song Qingshi bring out a vat large enough to pickle a human. He started to panic.

But Song Qingshi didn't notice. He threw the premeasured ingredients into the vat, then steeped them in water. Using his spiritual fire to control the temperature, he waited until the liquid inside the tank turned red before he turned to issue an order to Yue Wuhuan.

"Disrobe and get in."

Yue Wuhuan stood there, unmoving. Even his gaze turned stiff.

It occurred to Song Qingshi that he had forgotten to explain. “Oh, don’t be afraid! It’s a medicinal bath of purging red grass. Won’t hurt you.”

After hesitating for a moment, Yue Wuhuan slowly untied the sash at his waist.

Turning around, Song Qingshi sat with his back to Yue Wuhuan to preserve his modesty.

Yue Wuhuan let out a sigh of relief and whisked off his clothes. The medicine stung on his first step into the bloodred bath, then receded to a pleasant tingle. He took a deep breath and relaxed, submerging himself completely. Unexpectedly, the vat was too full, and water splashed over the tub’s rim, drenching Song Qingshi’s head. Red splotches bloomed on his pristine robes.

Most cultivators would bemoan such damage to their cultivation robes. Yue Wuhuan stepped out of the water and crouched behind the vat, fearing reprisal.

However, Song Qingshi didn’t even notice. He stared at the stone floor, unmoving. After some time, he finally realized there were droplets in his hair and shook his head.

Yue Wuhuan considered his options before asking timidly, “Zunzhu, why don’t you turn around? I’ll towel you dry.”

“You’re bathing. I can’t peek.” Song Qingshi folded further forward, staring at the stones with deep concentration. Doctors could examine their patients for treatment, but if a doctor spied on a bathing patient that would be a despicable transgression.

Yue Wuhuan turned these words over in his mind for a while.

“Is it because I’m too filthy?”

Song Qingshi shook his head. “You don’t like to be looked at.”

“What a funny joke, Zunzhu.” Yue Wuhuan’s gaze went cold. He stood up after a moment of silence, like a mermaid rising from the waves. Wet hair clung to his shoulders. Everything about him was perfect: He was well-proportioned, without an ounce of excess fat. A single arm would’ve circled his trim waist, but power hid there nonetheless. He leaned toward

Song Qingshi, resting his weight on the tub's rim. His breath tickled Song Qingshi's ear as his eyes beckoned. That single red mole could stop hearts.

"There's nothing about my unworthy body that's worth hiding," Yue Wuhuan said, his voice as low and sultry as a devil driving bargains. "Countless people have seen it and showered it with praise. They say my beauty is beyond measure, that I'm insatiable, that I was made to stay in bed, that I was born to be looked—"

"You don't like to be looked at," Song Qingshi repeated, interrupting him.

"I don't care anymore," Yue Wuhuan said hoarsely after a long silence.

Song Qingshi didn't know how else to explain, but he held firm. "You don't like it."

Could he say no because he didn’t like it? Yue Wuhuan thought it laughable. Those first few years he’d spent as a slave, he’d been coaxed to admit what he hated or didn’t want. They just turned those weaknesses against him for sport.

He didn’t like being watched, so his most private torments had played out in the square or during banquets, again and again for everyone to witness. He didn’t like dirty talk, so they’d forced drugs and toys on him until he’d learned how to use his voice to liven things up.

He made a pretty doll for high and mighty cultivators. Nothing need trouble him, so long as his masters could mold him to their liking.

He’d longed to go mad. If he lost his mind like most slaves, he could enjoy a thoughtless, carefree life like a dog, eager to please his masters.

Unfortunately, he’d always been quite clearheaded. He observed his haggard self like a bystander, then suffered through even more abuse.

Maybe he’d already gone mad.

The fire under the bath slowly intensified, and the medicine began to simmer. Yue Wuhuan flushed, but he couldn’t really feel the sweltering heat. He sank deeper in the blood-red bath. The water covered him until he couldn’t breathe, but he didn’t want to come up for air. Let him stay like this forever. The water might strip away his filthiness and melt his bones.

Abruptly, Song Qingshi noticed the unusual quiet behind him. Distracted while speaking, he’d neglected the spiritual fire. The tub had nearly boiled over, and Yue Wuhuan had disappeared under the water. With no time for thought, Song Qingshi lunged over and pulled his patient out of the vat.

Yue Wuhuan sprawled in his arms, limbs dangling. His eyes wouldn’t open. Hair stuck to his pale skin and water dripped all over the floor, making the tattoo on his back seem even more striking. Song Qingshi made no note of it as he rushed to check Yue Wuhuan’s pulse and start CPR.

Yue Wuhuan coughed up a mouthful of water and opened his eyes. Dazed, he saw Song Qingshi hovering above him, so close he could see his

own face reflected in that pair of clear, bright eyes. They were red from the heat, and there were water droplets on his long eyelashes.

This dewy youth couldn't be a two-faced yuanying-level master with nearly a thousand years of experience. On the riverbank, Yue Wuhuan had pitied Song Qingshi in ignorance.

Yue Wuhuan felt he truly deserved to die. The more he thought about it, the more his head spun. He shrank into himself, away from the memories playing before his eyes. The pain in his chest and the lingering warmth on his lips divided him between past and present. It was like he had returned to suffer his punishments anew.

Meanwhile, Overachiever Song felt like he'd nearly failed a class. When he thought about what he'd just done, his soul almost fled his body. Every action he'd taken after pulling Yue Wuhuan from the water was purely based on instinct. Now that Yue Wuhuan had come to, he realized the immortal realm had plenty of ways to save drowning victims. He didn't need modern methods.

How could he explain it?

Any medical student would've used CPR to save a drowning victim. That was elementary. The victim could be beautiful or hideous, a child or a grandfather, but the student would do it without hesitation.

Song Qingshi was embarrassed he'd forgotten to use the cultivation world's methods to save Yue Wuhuan, but he wouldn't beat himself up over it. It was just that he didn't know how to justify his current position.

Yue Wuhuan's eyes lost focus. He sprawled belly-up, like a beached fish dying on the shore, no longer trying to hide himself.

Song Qingshi turned away and closed his eyes. "Sorry. I forgot to control the temperature."

"You did no wrong." Yue Wuhuan stared but saw nothing, heard but couldn't comprehend. He repeated the only truth he knew. "It's my fault. My fault…"

That was the lesson he'd been taught after paying the price over and over again, until he took it as a fact of life.

"Wuhuan, you're gorgeous. You were born to be toyed with."

“Wuhuan, your body’s begging for it. You deserve to be ruined.”

“Wuhuan, you’re too seductive. Who could ever stop around you?”

“Wuhuan, you’re a monster born to accept others’ desires.”

“Wuhuan, this is your own fault.”

“Wuhuan, it’s your fault.”

“My fault, my fault, my fault,” Yue Wuhuan repeated. “It’s my fault.”

His life itself was a mistake.

Song Qingshi finally noticed that his patient was out of sorts and had slipped into some sort of trance. He draped his robe over Yue Wuhuan, then after some consideration, he gritted his teeth and raised a hand to slap him.

But Song Qingshi couldn’t follow through. Instead, he filled a basin with cold water. Using a freezing spell to make the water even colder, he lifted the basin and dumped it over Yue Wuhuan’s head.

The sensation was enough to shock Yue Wuhuan out of his stupor. Song Qingshi took the opportunity to feed him a calming pill.

“Zunzhu?” Yue Wuhuan murmured as he came to.

“It’s nothing.” Song Qingshi wrapped Yue Wuhuan like a zongzi[6] in the towel and clothes he’d prepared earlier. He gave him a reasonable explanation. “Nearly drowning caused you to have a fit. You’ve been hallucinating.”

Yue Wuhuan just nodded, lost.

Song Qingshi checked that his zongzi sat snug in its wrapper before nodding in return. “You’ll have to wear more in the future.”

“I can wear more clothes?” Yue Wuhuan asked uneasily.

“It’s almost fall,” Song Qingshi lectured. “The weather’s getting colder, so bundle up. Otherwise, you’ll catch a cold.”

“Thank you for caring,” Yue Wuhuan said once he believed Song Qingshi. He pulled his robes tight around himself. He couldn’t help but recall his arrival at Golden Phoenix Mountain. Back then, they had peeled off all his clothes, layer by layer. But now, this dissembling man redressed Yue Wuhuan layer by layer, like he wanted him to hope…

Yue Wuhuan's cut-short medicinal bath hadn't achieved its effect. Song Qingshi busied himself spooning more herbs and water into the vat and fiddled with the temperature.

Yue Wuhuan watched him bustle about and tried to collect his thoughts. He realized the pervasive heat that dogged him had lessened. When he moved his body a little, his skin no longer felt so sensitive, nor did the fabric of his robes chafe or prickle.

"Zunzhu, what's purging red grass used for?" Yue Wuhuan asked after gathering his courage. He'd tried to guess, but he had no idea.

"Huh?" Song Qingshi stopped what he was doing. He'd made the same mistake as all overachievers: His thoughts moved too fast. He assumed that others would understand him if he just said a name or noun without checking to see if the other party was following or not.

Song Qingshi, however, was a good student, willing to learn from his failures. He tried to put it in layman's terms.

"You've suffered adverse reactions from multiple substances. That's why you feel such discomfort. Purging red grass helps clear the residual drugs from your body. You'll take this bath five times, and in the last two I'll add muscle-regrowth flower and snow-toad butter, which will help repair wounds that haven't been allowed to heal. It'll hurt and feel itchy, but we can't use any sedatives. Don't worry, though. Once you're past that, you'll be as healthy as you were before."

One thing Song Qingshi couldn't bear to say: The people who'd enslaved Yue Wuhuan had never given a damn about killing him. They used all kinds of drugs in every combination to catastrophic effect, leaving lasting damage to his body. Had they continued, he would've survived only a few more years.

"Overdosed on drugs… Of course. They found me uninteresting." Yue Wuhuan burrowed further into his clothes, reluctant to emerge.

He hesitated for a long time, but finally decided to tamp down the unwillingness in his heart. He'd reveal the truth that Song Qingshi would find eventually.

"W-without the drugs I won't react to being tortured, which means you won't get any enjoyment from me, you know," Yue Wuhuan

stammered, forgetting to speak with the deference a slave should. “I-I’m not suited to such things, only the drugs make me—”

Song Qingshi interrupted him. “Don’t do things you’re not suited to.”

“You don’t need to be nice to me.” The more Yue Wuhuan revealed his innermost thoughts, the more panicked he felt, like a child who had wandered too far from home. “I don’t have anything to give you but my body.”

Seeing that Yue Wuhuan was becoming too emotional, Song Qingshi spun around. He knew he should intervene, but everything he thought to say vanished on the tip of his tongue. He couldn’t offer any comfort. It pained him, but in the end, he could only say two words:

“You do.”

In his heart, Yue Wuhuan was still that hardworking child swinging his blade through clouds of peach blossoms—the youth who dreamed of becoming a sword master despite his mortality. The phoenix Yue Wuhuan soared through the heavens like a guiding star in the night sky. It was just that his wings had been clipped and his brilliant plumage sullied.

Song Qingshi approached him, steady and certain of each step.

Though Yue Wuhuan tried to calm himself, his body shook uncontrollably. He made to scrabble away when Song Qingshi knelt before him and looked him dead in the eye. Yue Wuhuan felt pinned in place.

“Everything you once had, I’ll find and return to you. Everything you’ve longed for, I’ll give you,” Song Qingshi promised, enunciating each and every word.

Yue Wuhuan’s breath came short. He couldn’t guess what this promise entailed, but he saw Song Qingshi’s resolve and the determination in his eyes.

“What do you need me to do?” Yue Wuhuan asked.

“Don’t try to kill yourself again, okay?”

Yue Wuhuan thought for a long time before nodding.

Chapter 8

YEARS OF TRAUMA had led up to Yue Wuhuan's most recent suicide attempt. His emotional state was a mess, and he hadn't been in control of himself at the time, so Song Qingshi knew his promise could not be trusted.

The life seal could keep Yue Wuhuan from the deed itself, but for the bead to work, Song Qingshi would have to activate it. That would break the little trust he'd built with Yue Wuhuan and make his mental state worse. If Song Qingshi did that, his patient would never trust him enough to go through treatment, so it would be the worst way to prevent his death.

Song Qingshi discarded the life seal from consideration right away. Similar coercive spells existed for torturing enemies, but they weren't any better than the life seal. Song Qingshi also considered other ways to treat trauma, methods like hypnotism or erasing memories, but it was easy to wake from hypnotism. Once Yue Wuhuan did, things would be even worse. Erasing his memory might damage his spiritual senses, and Xie Que had taken in Yue Wuhuan at eight years old. That was a lifetime of memories. If Song Qingshi tried removing them, there was a good chance he'd damage Yue Wuhuan's brain.

Modern psychology proved the only viable choice.

Unfortunately, psychology was Song Qingshi's worst subject. He did fine on exams, but good grades wouldn't help him connect with the patient or analyze their thoughts. He hadn't overcome his own social anxiety, struggled to articulate himself, and couldn't read the room. As a result, he knew as much of the discipline as fit in an introductory textbook. How could he handle such a difficult case?

Once again, Overachiever Song quailed at the test before him. At this point, he was having nightmares of failing!

He started by removing everything in Yue Wuhuan's room that he might use to harm himself. Multiple times a day, he scanned Yue Wuhuan's vitals with his spiritual senses, fearful he'd missed some obvious sign that

Yue Wuhuan would leave him. It wasn't until he found Yue Wuhuan staring into the depths of the koi pond that he decided to hell with it. He had to try, even if it was their last resort.

Thus Dr. No-Good-At-Psych Song was forced to take the case.

He devised another treatment plan. He added calming medicine to Yue Wuhuan's draughts and lit incense every night to help him sleep. This greatly reduced the frequency with which he woke from nightmares. Song Qingshi also assembled a list of the few therapeutic methods he knew and eliminated inappropriate or impossible approaches. In the end, he arrived at REBT: rational emotive behavior therapy.

This was a form of psychotherapy created by Dr. Albert Ellis in the '50s. It focused on the individual's wants, needs, and beliefs. The psychologist first developed a good relationship with their patients and fostered their self-confidence. Then, rather than correcting their behavior, the psychologist would correct the erroneous beliefs that patients had about themselves, encouraging them to nurture accurate perceptions of the new lives before them.

It was simple in theory, but in practice it was harder than flying without wings.

Song Qingshi's favorite way to relax was to study and do practice questions. After thinking about how to share this with Yue Wuhuan, he finally took inspiration from the girls who'd flirted with him in the library in his past life. Song Qingshi would pick out a really difficult book, puzzle over it, then ask for Yue Wuhuan's help. If Yue Wuhuan was just as clueless, Song Qingshi would invite him to the library. Through rigorous research, he'd show Yue Wuhuan the joy of knowledge, which would help him gain self-confidence, and they could both have fun learning together.

There had been one girl at school who'd persisted in flirting with Song Qingshi. Every day, he encouraged her to also do practice questions and prioritize her studies over him. Desperate for his accolades, the girl had listened: Her grades shot up, and she was accepted into a postgraduate program at a prestigious university. She was moved to tears at graduation, saying Song Qingshi was the one who freed her from an incurable need for men.

Attention-seeking behavior was a symptom of some mental conditions, right?

Song Qingshi felt bolstered by his one successful case.

The original Song Qingshi had been a ravenous bookworm too. Tens of thousands of valuable books filled the estate vault, most to do with medicine or poisons.

Song Qingshi would tip his hand if he picked a book related to his profession. After careful consideration, he decided on *Travels of Yutai*, a travelogue of the immortal realm he'd found gathering dust in a heap of other neglected texts.

Some thousand years ago, a scholarly cultivator described a beautiful, far-flung paradise through graceful meter and subtle allusions. Song Qingshi wasn't the artsy type, and from membrane to mitochondria, there wasn't a romantic cell in his body. He never studied songs or poems, nor did he understand this world's stories and legends. To him, the travelogue was obscure and difficult to understand. At least it described some interesting flora.

Yue Wuhuan had taken the medicinal bath five times to flush the lingering drugs from his system. He needed to rest and recuperate before the upcoming meridian-repair bath.

Assured of Song Qingshi's chaste intentions, Yue Wuhuan no longer dressed and acted seductively. Instead he favored simple, comfortable green robes with high collars that covered his throat. He even put up his hair with a jade hair piece, and it was always immaculate. Nothing about the way he looked now was meant to be alluring, and he seemed more like a pure cultivator who followed every rule to a T. He didn't speak more than necessary or go where he shouldn't. His cold, impassive expression forbade any approach.

Though Song Qingshi used the excuse that he "just wasn't used to it" to tell Yue Wuhuan not to call himself a slave, Yue Wuhuan still spoke deferentially. When he addressed Song Qingshi, he lowered his head and responded with "yes," "all right," or "certainly."

Song Qingshi found Yue Wuhuan idling in a hallway. Holding the travelogue, he hid in the corner, observing his patient for a long time. Yue Wuhuan's tawdry artifice scared him as much as his real coldness, and Song Qingshi was more afraid of his rejection than anything. He had to mentally prepare himself before approaching his chilly patient.

Noticing Song Qingshi's surveillance, Yue Wuhuan couldn't help but look up.

Song Qingshi smiled clumsily and shuffled over like he'd just learned to move his limbs. He breathed deep, rallying his courage. He tried to tell himself that it was a coincidence, meeting Wuhuan-senpai! Here! In the library!

Once Song Qingshi felt brave enough, he flipped open the book and handed it over. "I can't understand this part. Could you explain it for me?"

Yue Wuhuan watched him contemplatively; he understood Song Qingshi less every day.

When Yue Wuhuan didn't respond, Song Qingshi fiddled with his own fingers. "Of course, if you can't grasp it, th-then…"

"Let me see." Yue Wuhuan read a few lines. He froze for a moment, then gave Song Qingshi a questioning glance. "'Yutai' here refers to the secret immortal realm of Yutai. Legend has it he prized beautiful people more than anything else in the world. He often left the heavens to invite gorgeous cultivators to frolic in the water with him. In this passage, the scholar Hongwen-xianzun imagines a risqué meeting with Yutai-xianjun. The scenery and objects allude to what's actually happening, so the 'soft jade and hanging boughs' refer to…"

The more Song Qingshi heard, the more confused he grew. He'd never read a single scandalous thing in his life. How'd he managed to mess this up so badly? By the time he returned to his senses, Yue Wuhuan had reached the line about "tumbling around like wind and rain."

Song Qingshi snatched the book, hid it behind himself, and summoned a flame to incinerate the wretched thing. Sweeping the ashes into the wind, he pretended nothing had happened.

For a half hour, the two of them stared at each other in silence.

Song Qingshi wanted to help Yue Wuhuan's mental health recover, but he'd accidentally forced his patient into a triggering situation. He couldn't have made a worse mistake. Frustration rose in his throat, his ears burned, he couldn't speak, and his eyes stung with unshed tears.

Yue Wuhuan was the first to react. Noting Song Qingshi's obvious discomfort, he tried to ease the awkwardness and comfort the doctor.

"Hongwen-xianzun's writing is a bit… Um. Most of his works are travelogues. This one's the exception. If you like that sort of thing, you could try *Records of the Pearl Sea Pavilion*, *Secret Realm of the Mountains*, or *The Unending Sea*. They'll be better."

Song Qingshi nodded wearily and made a note of that. The two of them stared at each other for another fifteen minutes. It was incredibly awkward.

Song Qingshi couldn't let this car crash continue. He wrenched back the conversation's steering wheel and accelerated ahead, trying to save the trip. "I've never heard of *Records of the Pearl Sea Pavilion*. It sounds interesting. Did you like it? What's it about? Will you tell me?"

Yue Wuhuan pondered this. He didn't know how to summarize it, so he recited the whole thing.

The system hadn't sent a poet, but Song Qingshi wasn't stupid. As he listened along, he realized Hongwen-xianzun was not a genius wordsmith. He was, instead, a pedant who used florid language and obscure anecdotes to pad out the word count. He pretended at brilliance and wisdom, but he actually churned out meaningless garbage.

"Zunzhu, would you like to hear something else?" Yue Wuhuan asked.

That gave Song Qingshi pause. He had excellent recall when it came to books, but that was limited to short and snappy passages. Memorization took work. Who would waste their effort on trash? *And* retain the whole thing? Even the vague allusions?

He ventured a careful question. "Have you read a lot of books? Where?"

“The royal teacher taught me some when I was younger. I read when I was with Xie Que as well.” Yue Wuhuan thought Song Qingshi was interrogating him about his past, so he didn’t dare conceal the truth. “I read most at Phoenix Mountain. I… If I satisfied my master, he’d allow me to visit the library. Please rest assured I know my place. I am only worthy of reading frivolous books and won’t touch any cultivation texts, only light reading.”

Phoenix Mountain had a tremendous library. At first, Yue Wuhuan had nurtured a small hope he’d discover the means to escape his situation among its books. But Phoenix Mountain forbade non-disciples from borrowing cultivation texts. Once, he had bribed the library clerks with his body for two low-level cultivation books, but by that point he’d lost most of his progress and had surrendered to the life seal. His study amounted to nothing.

The original Song Qingshi had seen Phoenix Mountain’s collection. It was several times larger than his own, with tens of thousands of books unrelated to cultivation.

“You remember every one of those books? You can recite all of them?” Song Qingshi urged Yue Wuhuan.

“I can only remember the ones I’ve read.” He hesitated. “Over ten thousand, perhaps. If you need me to, I can recite them.”

Song Qingshi gasped in genuine astonishment. He forgot about any treatment and scrambled to find a brush, all colors of ink, and a ruler. Then, through both text and diagrams, he recreated questions from IQ tests he’d taken and presented this to Yue Wuhuan.

Yue Wuhuan puzzled over these mysterious drawings and riddles. After Song Qingshi guided him through a few of the questions, he caught on. In no time, he handed the finished test back to Song Qingshi.

As Song Qingshi calculated the score, he nearly lost his breath. He’d considered himself lucky to join the high-IQ club in his previous life, but he’d barely scraped past the acceptance line. He was no genius, and he studied hard to compensate. But Yue Wuhuan’s off-the-cuff answers had netted him a score of 162, which placed him among the very upper echelons of intelligence—the level of a super genius. On top of that, if Song Qingshi

accounted for Yue Wuhuan's lack of education, familiarity with the test's methodology, and his worldview, he might've scored even higher.

In the past, he'd felt pity for Yue Wuhuan and regretted everything he was forced to endure, but this? This enraged him. How could those monsters torture a brilliant youth whose talents might have changed history?! What a waste. There was no difference between their crimes and feeding Einstein to wild cave men!

"This is too much," said Song Qingshi. He was so angry he was tearing up, but he couldn't think of any insults to express his fury. He could only lament. "Too much, too much…"

Song Qingshi scrubbed at his eyes, wiping away tears, while Yue Wuhuan looked on, perplexed.

"Wuhuan, you're *very* smart," Song Qingshi said earnestly.

"Zunzhu, there's no point in doing this." Yue Wuhuan lowered his gaze. He knew no one would care whether or not he was smart. They only cared how many different ways he could entertain in bed. No one cared if he could read, only if he cried in a way that pleased them. He couldn't help but sneer, and his eyes narrowed in malice under the shadow of his brow. His intelligence only made him more aware of his own pain.

"In the immortal realm, the strongest beasts devour the weak."

Chapter 9

YUE WUHUAN STOOD in the library of the Medicine King's Valley. Looking at the books of precious cultivation and secrets, he felt like he'd entered a treasure trove.

Neither version of Song Qingshi concerned himself with the trivialities that came with daily life. The library was an off-limits area, so there were no servants to keep it tidy. Only he knew where to find things in the mess of heaped-up books and papers.

When Song Qingshi led Yue Wuhuan inside, he asked him to tidy up the desk and left to find the books he needed.

Yue Wuhuan reluctantly tore his gaze away from the collection. A low table piled high with hundreds of books sat on a daybed by the window. Dried ink, brushes, and crumpled paper covered in discarded ideas littered the area. It seemed like Song Qingshi liked to rest and read here.

Yue Wuhuan walked over. Resigned, he took each book from the pile, then carefully set it to the side. Hidden underneath all the books, he discovered a tattered copy of *Nie's Book of Poison*. Yue Wuhuan's breath caught in his throat. Thousands of years ago, even great and honorable heroes had trembled before the fearsome poison master Nie Jue. He'd killed without remorse and recorded the recipes for his fatal concoctions in this very book.

Yue Wuhuan glanced at Song Qingshi, who wasn't paying attention, before paging through the book. He was shocked to find the first recipe was Nie Jue's famous powder of contortion. It was colorless, tasteless, and could kill any cultivator who hadn't reached the yuanying level. He'd hunted in vain for something like this at Phoenix Mountain: a way to kill without using cultivation.

Yue Wuhuan committed the recipe to memory and read on through the others. The powder of contortion, soul-devouring incense, the pill of puppetry…

Each of these was a powerful, sharp knife.

The murderous intent he'd worked so hard to dam up inside himself came flooding out, stirring his emotions. Countless ways to use these poisons surfaced in his mind. No one knew that his heart had turned demonic in that hell, that he longed to pile up mountains of corpses. He didn't want to destroy himself alone—he wanted to take this disgusting world down with him.

"That book's not suitable for you," Song Qingshi said behind him.

Yue Wuhuan closed the book and returned it to the pile. He faced Song Qingshi like nothing had happened and sold his prepared excuse with an obedient smile.

"I was trying to clean up and the pages fell out. This book is too old. I'm so sorry, Zunzhu. Please forgive me."

Song Qingshi put down the large pile of books in his arms and thumbed through *Nie's Book of Poison*. A few pages *had* actually come loose.

Yue Wuhuan looked down at the floor. His palms had begun to sweat.

"You lack the fundamentals. This book's too advanced for you." Song Qingshi hadn't detected Yue Wuhuan's ill intent at all. "Medicine and poison work on the same theory. Start from medicine. For example, heavenly grass seeds and swallow-orchid seeds look similar, but the effects of their poisons are very different. Using them for the wrong purpose would get you the wrong result. You must learn the basics of medicine, how to identify different herbs, what their effects are, then learn to create elixirs. After all that, you can study this book of poisons."

Yue Wuhuan felt certain he'd misheard. "You'll let me study this book?"

"Why not?" Song Qingshi didn't understand. He offered *Nie's Book of Poison* back to Yue Wuhuan. "Have more confidence in yourself. This stuff's not difficult to understand. You'll master it right away with your intellect. But you'll have to be careful if you try to make anything. There's things in there that you shouldn't touch directly. Some are airborne…so if you don't understand something, ask me for help."

How did Song Qingshi consider this a question of confidence? Yue Wuhuan was too astonished to respond.

Song Qingshi had no idea and continued to smack Yue Wuhuan with words. “If poison interests you, you should learn to use hidden weapons and arrays. It’ll be easier for you to use the poisons that way. I’ll find some related books later. You can use my lab too.”

Yue Wuhuan couldn’t hold it in anymore. He interrupted Song Qingshi’s excited rambling. “Haven’t you considered what I’d do with this?”

“I have.” Song Qingshi’s eyes shone with relief. He’d been worried this protagonist was too kind and easy to bully. Anyone could pick a helpless, dainty flower. He feared that once he finished his task, the system would remove him from the setting, leaving no one to protect Yue Wuhuan, and hell would snatch him back.

“Wuhuan, don’t be afraid,” he said. “Being beautiful is not a sin. It’s the fault of those monsters. Weapons, poison… If the strong devour the weak in the immortal realm, make it so no one can harm you.

“Was it wrong to not want to be ruined?

“Was it wrong to not want to be hurt?

“Was it wrong to say no?”

A fresh breeze whistled past the window, carrying the scent of medicine that tangled up in Yue Wuhuan’s emotions. No one had ever spoken to him this way before. Surely he’d dreamed each word.

“No one in the world will humiliate you ever again.”

Learning required mutual discussion and continuous growth.

Song Qingshi loved his study buddies, especially study buddies who were just as smart as him. He’d studied under an internationally renowned medical expert. His upperclassmen were talented beyond compare, and he missed the beautiful days he’d spent learning and doing experiments with them. Yue Wuhuan was intelligent and industrious. What more could Overachiever Song ask for in life?

He helped Yue Wuhuan clear the daybed of irrelevant books, then used cleaning spells to wipe the table before setting out tea and snacks.

Incense would keep them alert. Finally, he pulled Yue Wuhuan to the daybed. They sat opposite each other and began to read.

Yue Wuhuan's thoughts raced. He monitored Song Qingshi in his peripheral vision until he felt certain the man was reading and had no intention of doing otherwise. Bit by bit, he relaxed and allowed himself to focus on his own book.

At some point, clouds dimmed the sun. Rain played tinkling music on the rooftops. Chilly wind gusted through the window, covering them in damp. Yue Wuhuan shivered. He rose to fetch a luminous pearl and drew the curtains shut. When he looked back, Song Qingshi was still absorbed in the scroll in his hands. He hadn't even noticed the change in his surroundings.

Yue Wuhuan crept toward Song Qingshi with his head lowered, raising just his beautiful eyes to inspect him. This was the first time Yue Wuhuan had really taken a good look at him. He sketched the jade-like man in his mind: a swath of snow-white robes, rumpled hair, a youthful face. His beauty wouldn't devastate, but he had the clearest eyes Yue Wuhuan had ever seen. They did not know lust or filth. They were instead like two crystal balls that had tumbled to earth from the heavens—yet nothing mortal tainted them.

Yue Wuhuan watched for a long, long time, but Song Qingshi never looked up. It was as if he would admit nothing into his eyes and heart aside from the books in this room.

Yue Wuhuan stifled a laugh. If anyone heard that the eccentric Medicine King and the infamous slut Wuhuan-gongzi had sat in the study an entire day doing nothing but reading, would they believe it?

One had to obsess over something to succeed, and an obsession demanded maniacal focus on a single thing, which in turn became the obsessive's true desire. It turned out that the Medicine King was obsessed with books, and this obsession engendered all his eccentricities. No one had ever seen that under his crazy exterior lay a simple, pure heart.

Yue Wuhuan looked down and allowed himself a private laugh. His smile turned bitter. He thought back to their meeting by the riverside—the feel of Song Qingshi's soft hair and yielding cheek under his fingertips. They had almost burned. If he'd known this day awaited him, he would've

risked any punishment to make himself a little more presentable and disguise the worst parts of himself.

Night fell. The rain stopped. The moon peeked out, and bugs chirped in the bushes under its light.

It was like the library existed removed from that world, unchanging. There was no commotion, no interruption, only the rustle of pages and the cold, pervading scent of medicine. As Yue Wuhuan read, a peace he'd never felt before calmed his heart.

Wouldn't it be great to spend a lifetime this way?

Song Qingshi put down his book, picked up a brush, and scribbled something. He wrote rapidly, his handwriting messy. Yue Wuhuan couldn't decipher the whole of it, but he recognized a few medicines.

Song Qingshi stopped as abruptly as he'd begun and occupied himself in thought. He dragged his left hand through the still-wet patch of ink, then rested his cheek against his palm, transferring the mark to his face.

That black blotch left Yue Wuhuan thunderstruck.

He tried his best, but in the end he couldn't resist. After finding a handkerchief, he wiped away the stain on the one thing he saw as immaculate.

Song Qingshi surfaced from his reading and realized with a start that it was already dark. Looking at the ink on Yue Wuhuan's handkerchief, he shrank in embarrassment.

"Ah, I tend to get too occupied with reading and forget the time. Are you hungry? You can just interrupt me next time."

Yue Wuhuan smiled as he shook his head. "I was just as occupied. I didn't see it get dark."

"Here." Song Qingshi pushed the platter of snacks toward him. "I don't need to eat and won't get hungry."

Yue Wuhuan didn't push it and picked up a small hibiscus cake. He tried to start a conversation.

"Zunzhu, you're working hard. Are you trying to create some important medicine?"

“The meridian repair bath.”

Yue Wuhuan froze.

“You’re going to need it later.” Song Qingshi shuffled his papers into a stack and scratched his head, frustrated. He struggled to find the language to explain. “It’ll reopen your meridians. But I tried it myself, and it’s far too painful. You might not be able to take it. I want to find some way to lessen the pain. I can’t decide if it’s better to reduce the strength or to numb your senses. I might try a few more times.”

If they opened his meridians, he could cultivate again. But why was Song Qingshi even bothering?

“Zunzhu.” Yue Wuhuan heard his own voice tremble. “I’m not afraid of pain.”

“Everyone’s afraid of pain. That’s why medical experts look for ways to lessen it. Patients can go into shock if their pain is bad enough.” Song Qingshi looked back down at the paper in his hands. He spoke the next words the way he’d note the weather, or that the sky was blue. “I don’t want you to go through that.”

Why didn’t Song Qingshi want Yue Wuhuan to suffer? Why was he so good to him? Yue Wuhuan craved an answer to the question that so consumed him. Finally, he asked it:

“Why?”

Song Qingshi didn’t understand why the system had ordered him to keep everything secret from the main character, nor did he know what “OOC” meant, but his intuition said Yue Wuhuan’s current mental state couldn’t bear the weight of such preposterous truths. He didn’t like to lie, so he considered his answer long enough that Yue Wuhuan didn’t expect one at all.

Song Qingshi smiled a little bashfully as he recalled the day he was granted another chance at life, and the beautiful sunlight that had banished the dark clouds in his heart. That tiny sliver of kindness had been enough to chase away his fear of this strange new world.

“You wished me good luck that night. I want a lifetime of good luck for both of us.”

Chapter 10

STUDYING CURED ALL mental illnesses!

Song Qingshi was pleasantly surprised to find that Yue Wuhuan's gloom had lifted. He was like a porcelain doll granted life or withered flowers bursting into bloom once more. He approached without hesitation, spoke freely, and did things of his own volition. Every morning, he waited outside Song Qingshi's door so they could walk to the library together. No wonder readers loved the male lead. Who wouldn't? Though the world had wronged him, he offered kindness in return.

Slowly, Song Qingshi's anxiety abated, and he started revealing his true self to Yue Wuhuan.

A hesitant knock came from outside his bedroom.

He raised his head groggily from the table. The previous night's reading had lulled him to sleep. It was light out already, and he was running late. He didn't know how long his visitor had stood waiting, so he leaped up, checked if he had drooled on himself, then ran to the door without stopping to change or pull on his shoes.

"Sorry, I fell asleep at the table again," Song Qingshi said, yawning. He scrubbed the grit from his tired, red eyes. He was embarrassed to have broken his promise to get proper rest, but did his best to stand up straight and seem innocent, like a cat that'd been caught trying to steal a fish.

He snuck a glance at the person who'd come to see him—Yue Wuhuan.

Yue Wuhuan, for his part, felt like the scene before him wasn't quite real.

"It's all right," Yue Wuhuan said. "I only just got here. Just don't do it again." Song Qingshi was now his teacher, so he had to show him the appropriate respect.

Originally, he'd decided that he'd do everything Song Qingshi asked and never disobey him, but Song Qingshi never actually made any requests.

Instead, he slept at odd times (if he remembered to sleep), forgot to eat, and when an idea possessed him, he wouldn't rest for days on end. At the same time, he had no idea how to take care of himself. His room was a disaster, he was clumsy when he brushed his hair, and he always wore the same clothes. He never paid attention to his own daily necessities and didn't even know how to manage the servants. No one knew who was responsible for what or if they even had responsibilities.

How could anyone find this man cruel and merciless? Yue Wuhuan thought, dazed.

Song Qingshi found this assessment unfair. All his life, he'd never worried about anything other than his studies. He wore the same clothes, all in a similar color palette, so he didn't waste time choosing. He never cared if his haircut was fashionable or what he ate. He'd take whatever the maid cooked. Everyone said he was low-maintenance! His professors dictated his research and his upperclassmen managed him as one of the underclassmen. He only needed to obey them and take good notes. He was a model student.

How was he supposed to know that after transmigrating into a novel, he would need to save the main character and govern the Medicine King's Valley?

The original Song Qingshi also had social anxiety and was even less adept at communication. Taking cues from him seemed pointless. However, as Song Qingshi browsed his predecessor's memories, he didn't actually find the man *that* strange or unstable. Most of the time, reason dictated his rage. Once, a servant had washed a jar full of poisonous mushrooms that had been nurtured for years but wouldn't admit it. Another time, someone had praised the intoxication pill he'd developed over centuries by saying it made a terrific party drug. They compared an anesthesia developed for surgeries to *roofies*! Song Qingshi was so furious he couldn't speak, so he just killed them to get it over with.

Either way, the servants walked on thin ice. Their master gave them clipped, cryptic orders, and they had to puzzle out his intent from there. It was not easy. When they saw him, they scattered like mice before a cat. They didn't address him, never mind approach.

Once he recognized this, Song Qingshi moved to correct his original's mismanagement. He'd establish the Medicine King's Valley as

the immortal realm's premier medical research facility. After drafting a plan, he named Yue Wuhuan his assistant, responsible for communications and internal affairs.

Now that he was fully prepared, everything could run smoothly.

The valley was reorganized and the servants' duties reshuffled. Everyone knew their responsibilities. A few who were willing to learn and work hard were even granted the opportunity to learn basic medicine. In the future, they could serve as emergency doctors.

With his new title, Yue Wuhuan held a pass that permitted him to go anywhere in the valley, including the treasury.

"Zunzhu, how can you trust others so easily?" he asked with a complicated expression.

"Not anyone. Just you," said Song Hands-Off Qingshi.

The protagonist was a system-certified Good Person. There was no way his character had fatal flaws! Besides, the busier he was, the less time he could spare for negative thoughts.

Song Qingshi had killed a flock of birds with one stone!

Yue Wuhuan was deeply grateful, and applied himself to his duties with zeal. He'd been born to a royal family and had lived many years at Phoenix Mountain. He knew what people wanted and didn't lack for practical skills. Housekeeping came easily to him. He cleaned Song Qingshi's room, cared for his clothes, prepared his food, woke him in the mornings, and saw to other assorted tasks.

He liked this kind of life. Ordinary. Trivial. He could almost pretend he was a normal person.

Song Qingshi thought Yue Wuhuan's mental state was getting better by the day. He smiled more and didn't seem so hopeless. He occupied himself with repairing his meridians and restoring his cultivation.

The process piqued Song Qingshi's interest. Modern science didn't recognize spiritual roots or meridians. While Yue Wuhuan saw to his work, Song Qingshi rushed to the makeshift morgue in the basement. From a few hundred cadavers, he selected ones with wood element spiritual roots and

ones whose spiritual roots had shattered. He dissected them, searching for the physiological differences between mortals and cultivators. What exactly *was* the spiritual root?

Illness had hindered his dexterity in his previous life, so during anatomy lab, he'd only watched as his peers performed dissections. He always envied them. Now that he had won another chance at life and had a healthy body, he'd fulfill another dream: his very own autopsy! He could not have been happier.

The blade danced between his fingers as he opened cadaver after cadaver. He was so giddy he didn't notice the time at all.

Every time Song Qingshi finished with one cadaver, he'd stop, remove his mask, and make notes. Snacks and alertness tea helped keep him awake.

Just as he settled down for another snack-and-notes break, Yue Wuhuan arrived with dinner. Upon seeing the cadavers filling the room, their viscera on full display, Yue Wuhuan froze.

"Zunzhu. What is all this?" he asked carefully.

Song Qingshi almost choked on his mouthful of osmanthus cake. His heart pounded as he turned around slowly. It was over. He…completely forgot to tell Yue Wuhuan not to enter the dissection room.

Dissection was a very important part of modern medicine. Every year, the upperclassmen had anticipated the new students' first visits to the lab. The upperclassmen traded surreptitious bets: How many newbies would puke? How many would faint? How many would stick it out? Invariably, each year some new students had to be carried out. The next time, they'd throw up again, but they'd get used to it eventually. After a few short years, they also became seasoned warriors who could finish a dissection and rush to the cafeteria to gnaw on ribs.

But Yue Wuhuan probably hadn't cut open anything, not even a frog. Would this be too much of a shock?

Song Qingshi looked around the dissection room that, thanks to his enthusiasm, now looked very like a crime scene. Stacks of mangled bodies lay scattered around the room. A rancid stench filled the air. He gulped down the cake filling his mouth and grabbed a bucket for Yue Wuhuan.

“Let me explain, and don’t panic,” Song Qingshi said. “It’s not what you think.”

Chapter 11

"I'M NOT PANICKING. Go ahead."

Yue Wuhuan had a stronger constitution than those new students. He walked through the room full of flesh and blood, put the food down, then, with a furrowed brow, brushed crumbs from the corner of Song Qingshi's mouth. Recently, he'd gotten into the habit of eating with Song Qingshi. Yue Wuhuan's appetite improved whenever he smelled that clean scent.

Song Qingshi watched Yue Wuhuan. He didn't seem liable to break down, so Song Qingshi quietly put the bucket back. He was now even more sure that his student was suited for the medical profession: He was smart, logical, calm, clever with his hands, and not afraid of blood. Those characteristics made a good surgeon. If they were back on Earth, the med schools would've gone to war to sponsor him.

Without warning, Song Qingshi embarked on an anatomy lesson, detailing the importance of dissection to the study of medicine and the invaluable contribution donors had made for humanity.

Yue Wuhuan listened intently, and even scrutinized the cadavers in detail. Song Qingshi's worry amused him. Many guests of Golden Phoenix Mountain savored blood. Sometimes they'd beat slaves to death, and the victim would have to be carried out like refuse. Yue Wuhuan had suffered at the hands of those butchers before, until wounds covered every inch of his skin. If he hadn't possessed wood element spiritual roots that gave him extraordinary healing abilities, he would've been free of this existence long ago.

A corpse was just a piece of flesh. Once his torture had started, he'd only ever feared the living.

Yue Wuhuan inspected each cadaver, sighing to himself. He stopped and stared at a large male cadaver in the corner. Once again, he struggled with an unwanted memory. After a moment of fighting it, something yielded inside him, and malice flooded his beautiful eyes. His lips curved into a gentle arc, and he slowly turned around, keeping himself in check.

“Zunzhu, can I try dissecting this one?”

Song Qingshi paused midway through the dinner his little angel had brought him and looked up in shock.

He considered their situation. This wasn’t a modern medical school, so there weren’t that many rules when it came to dissection. If Yue Wuhuan wanted to learn, he should support him.

He found a new hooded robe for Yue Wuhuan, then directed him to wash his hands and disinfect them before he donned a mask and gloves.

Yue Wuhuan touched his gloves in confusion. “Why do we need to wear these?”

“To prevent the spread of pathogens,” Song Qingshi warned. “We don’t have formaldehyde or reliable disinfectants. We preserve the bodies via a spiritual crystal array. We don’t know the cause of death for every cadaver, and some arrived without being cleaned. It’s better to be safe. Make a habit of disinfecting before and after any exploration.”

For a medical student, this routine was law. He refused to believe spiritual powers could completely eradicate pathogens. He had to disinfect to feel safe.

Yue Wuhuan looked at the cadaver he’d chosen and chuckled. “It *is* quite dirty.”

“An Long gave me this one.” Song Qingshi passed him a thin blade. “An Long is the Xilin Poison King, an insect expert and a talented medic. We often exchange resources. He’s so nice! A few days ago, he sent this with a messenger. I’m supposed to solve a puzzle. Apparently the cause of death is very interesting, so he wants me to guess how this person died.”

An Long was the original Song Qingshi’s only friend. The two of them often exchanged the results of their research and other knowledge. For some reason, though, they had stopped speaking in recent years.

Song Qingshi had discovered their letters while organizing the previous Medicine King’s estate, and An Long’s knowledge and skills had filled him with deep respect and admiration. It moved him to resume their communication, offering some modern findings on entomopathogenic fungi that had stumped An Long for many years.

After receiving the letter, An Long responded with delight and a heap of gifts, among them a few corpses that had experienced unusual, unfortunate ends. He even promised to thank Song Qingshi in person in a few days.

Song Qingshi loved the gifts and anticipated welcoming this enthusiastic entomologist with open arms.

Yue Wuhuan accepted the blade with a smile. With a harsh stab and no hesitation, he opened up the cadaver's chest.

"Hold on! Hold on!" Song Qingshi cried, leaping to stop him. "Look at the musculature and connective tissues before cutting. Mind the direction of the blood vessels and isolate each layer. You almost broke a bone and punctured an organ! Be careful with those!"

"Yes, Zunzhu." Yue Wuhuan looked down at the still heart pinned beneath his blade and beamed. "Do you know who this was?"

"A righteous hero, I think. Yu Something…"

"Yu Qing. What a pity. He's supposed to be a great hero, an upright gentleman. How did he end up in a morgue with no one to bury him?" Yue Wuhuan spoke quietly, but there was an undeniable sneer in his voice—well, undeniable for everyone except Song Qingshi, who didn't notice.

"Plenty of people die here in the immortal realm, so there are unwanted corpses everywhere. No matter who they were in life, everyone's the same in death." Song Qingshi stared at Yue Wuhuan's movements, then suddenly started forward. "Ah, watch out, you've nicked the heart!"

Yue Wuhuan looked up and said quietly, "Oh, so it's not black?"

He slashed the repulsive carcass to pieces, laughing at each pass of the blade. The same joy must have tickled Yu Qing when he'd treated Yue Wuhuan the same way.

At the time, Yue Wuhuan hadn't been at Phoenix Mountain for long. He was still Jin Feiren's personal toy and hadn't accepted his slavery yet. The naive hope that a good person would sweep in and save him still flickered in his heart.

Golden Phoenix Mountain hosted a banquet for the master of Qinghong Sect, so the two sects could hold some friendly sword competitions and exchange techniques. Qinghong Sect had a sterling reputation in the immortal realm and its members were known for their intolerance of evil. Yu Qing was one of their most talented young disciples. He exuded righteousness and spared no attention for the beauties serving him. It seemed like he lusted after nothing and would never do anything indecent.

Yue Wuhuan thought he might be a good person, so he summoned his courage and begged for Yu Qing's help.

Yu Qing appraised him in silence.

Yue Wuhuan knew his chances were slim, so he didn't dare insist.

He never imagined that Yu Qing would be a pervert who loved to torture others.

"Even at the banquet, your eyes beguiled me. You're temptation in the flesh," Yu Qing said.

Although Yu Qing never got his hands on Yue Wuhuan's life bead, he was a cultivator with a golden core. Yue Wuhuan lacked the power to resist. Very quickly, Yu Qing restrained Yue Wuhuan, leaving him at his mercy.

Yue Wuhuan only escaped hell's clutches the next morning. But he was discovered and brought before Jin Feiren and the master of Qinghong Sect. Covered in injuries, he knelt in front of everyone.

Yu Qing was an important disciple of Qinghong Sect and had a noble reputation. He shouldn't have touched Jin Feiren's slave. Embarrassed, Qinghong Sect made frenzied apologies on Yu Qing's behalf, proclaiming that they would severely punish him. The entire situation was very ugly.

Instead of showing anger, Jin Feiren laughed and extended an olive branch.

"My slave was disobedient. How is Hero Yu at fault?"

Yue Wuhuan startled. He looked up, wanting to explain, but Jin Feiren's eyes narrowed in warning and his hand moved within his sleeve. Yue Wuhuan's life seal burned. He struggled to keep silent, but the loathsome words escaped him anyway:

“This slave shamed himself. I couldn’t resist when I saw how handsome Yu-xianzhang was…

“This slave wasn’t hurt. I fell because my legs shook…

“This lowly slave admits it. Please, please punish me.”

His injuries were apparent, but forcing him to take the blame allowed for a clean resolution. The outcome satisfied both parties.

Jin Feiren indulged Yu Qing by loaning him Yue Wuhuan’s life bead for a few days and encouraging him to enjoy himself. Yue Wuhuan gained intimate acquaintance with the great hero’s depravity.

He incurred terrible injuries, but he refused to cry in pain or beg for mercy ever again, because he had come to understand exactly what he was: a slave. He no longer harbored any other delusions.

Yue Wuhuan opened up the corpse’s head with a saw.

“He’s missing half of his brain. An insect ate it. That’s your cause of death,” he concluded quietly. “He must have died a painful, terrible death.”

Yue Wuhuan was glad the mask concealed his smile and malice, lest his expression prove too monstrous.

Song Qingshi observed the body and nodded his assent. “Yes. That’s an awful way to die. What a pity.”

“A pity indeed.” Yue Wuhuan looked at the knife in his hand, the remnants of his joy fading. He couldn’t hold back a feeling of regret.

If only he could have done this while Yu Qing was still alive.

Chapter 12

HAVING A GOOD MEMORY didn't benefit Yue Wuhuan. His mind stored each hurt and every nightmare, then used them to torment itself again and again.

That night, the calming incense couldn't suppress his heartache. He dreamed once again of Golden Phoenix Mountain, drawn back to that gilded birdcage.

The brand on his back sizzled and the life seal fixed him in place. He was forced to the floor, to watch those youthful captives act out an absurd play, one farce after another.

The air was too rank to breathe in this filthy world. Human life had no worth. People were toys to be played with and discarded.

How dirty. How disgusting.

Yue Wuhuan curled up in despair, trying to avoid the hands reaching toward him. He wanted to flay every inch of the skin they'd touched from his body. The taint spread everywhere and left him in complete disarray. He couldn't breathe. He died and woke again, still caged, and the nightmare repeated until he lost his mind, gave up struggling, and allowed his body to be consumed.

Suddenly, the cage bars buckled in a burst of red lotus flame, and a medicinal scent swept away the clouds of stench. The salacious sounds had disappeared from around him. He opened his eyes warily. A youth wearing snow-white robes stood before him.

The youth smelled clean. He gazed at Yue Wuhuan without lecherous intent as one of his hands emerged from the layers of his sleeves. Even his fingertips smelled like unmarred snow.

He offered his upturned palm for a long time before Yue Wuhuan figured out he was reaching for *him*.

He longed to touch that immaculate being. He'd just raised his hand, when he saw how grimy it was, along with the red welts circling his wrists.

He snatched his hand back, wanting to hide it behind his back. But then he saw that his body was covered in blood, and every last inch of his skin was sullied.

“Don’t touch me. I’ll defile your hand.

“Don’t look at me. I’ll cloud your sight.

“Don’t save me. Just kill me.”

In his terror, he crept back until he was completely draped in shadows, concealed even from his own sight.

The youth advanced, extending his hand over and over. He entered the darkness, too, until Yue Wuhuan could no longer retreat. Finally, the youth removed his snow-white robe, draped it over Yue Wuhuan, and embraced him like a precious, fragile treasure. He removed his shackles one by one and wiped away all his stains.

The youth gazed at him alone. That refreshing scent wafted around him. Each soft fingertip sparked and fed a hopeful flame.

He wanted this man, wanted to *keep* him. He surged with the feral desire to clutch that gentleness all for himself. He yearned to defile this purity—to bite the hand that fed him.

Yue Wuhuan breathed harshly and pushed the youth away. It wasn’t safe to get closer.

He couldn’t desecrate a god.

Yue Wuhuan jolted awake, panting. A wisp of sweet fragrance mingled with the faint scent of medicinal herbs.

To his surprise, he saw Song Qingshi next to him, resting his head on the bed, a luminous pearl in hand. His eyes sparkled with reflected light as he stared at Yue Wuhuan like he was waiting for a birthday party.

After staring back for a minute, Yue Wuhuan slowly shut his eyes. He suspected this was still a dream.

“Quit sleeping!” Song Qingshi shouted. “Wake up!”

That did the trick.

“Zunzhu, why are you here?” Yue Wuhuan croaked, fully awake this time.

“Wuhuan, listen!” Song Qingshi said delightedly. “I found a way to alleviate the side effects of the meridian repair bath, so I came to wake you. Get up! Time for treatment!”

Yue Wuhuan squinted out the window at the still-dim sky. It was just before dawn, wasn’t it?

Song Qingshi felt fantastic, whole and hale, after solving the problem that had plagued him for many days. He was vibrating with excitement, like a soccer fan whose team had just won the World Cup. He had rambled about his success to anyone he could find, but of all those residing in the Medicine King’s Valley, Yue Wuhuan was his closest confidant and greatest inspiration. It had taken all his might to wait until the morning before coming to grab him.

“Hurry up, hurry up!”

“All right.” Yue Wuhuan smiled. However, as he went to shuck his blanket off, he stopped. “Zunzhu, can you wait outside? I’ll come out once I’ve changed.”

Song Qingshi realized he might have overstepped. Some experiments in his previous life required twenty-four-hour supervision, so he and his upperclassmen would trade shifts throughout the evening. It wasn’t unusual to wake someone in their dorm in the middle of the night. He’d forgotten that even though Yue Wuhuan was a man, he had to be mindful of the implications. Running to someone’s bed like this could be misconstrued.

He’d hate to remind Yue Wuhuan of his traumas…

Song Qingshi immediately checked his behavior. Trying to channel the perfect gentleman, he turned to leave.

Yue Wuhuan sighed in relief. That terrifying dream was still fresh in his mind. Desperately, he tried to curb his disgusting possessiveness. He didn’t want to stain that pure-white sheet of paper.

He was far too unclean.

Song Qingshi waited impatiently outside Yue Wuhuan’s door for a long time.

Finally, Yue Wuhuan emerged clean and dressed. He looked normal to Song Qingshi and didn’t seem to begrudge his earlier rashness. Song Qingshi breathed a sigh of relief. Happily, he dragged Yue Wuhuan to the treatment room.

Two boxes of acupuncture needles awaited their use.

In traditional Chinese medicine, one used acupuncture to achieve anesthetic effects. It only produced local numbing, the effectiveness differed from person to person, and it couldn’t numb all pain. Patients didn’t usually opt for it, since it proved less effective than western anesthesia, so it was only used in special circumstances.

Song Qingshi had searched the original’s memories and discovered the structure of this world’s meridians and dantians interacted with acupuncture in a way that exponentially increased its effects. He could even achieve precise local anesthesia by pushing his spiritual power in along with the needle.

It was like a door had opened to him. He’d tried it on himself many times and had confirmed that he could narrow the area of effect without compromising efficacy. He could decrease the pain by 50 percent—and thus lower the pain from the meridian repair bath to a tolerable level!

Song Qingshi stumbled through the explanation at first, but he eventually conveyed the theory to Yue Wuhuan.

“I will pierce you with two hundred gold needles. Don’t worry, it won’t hurt, just tingle a bit. Next, you’ll go into the medicinal bath. After I’ve opened your meridians, I’ll extract the needles and use medicine to reconstruct your dantian.”

Yue Wuhuan just stared at him.

“Although you’ll undress for the acupuncture, and I might have to touch you, I’m a doctor. Doctors don’t see sex. Only the patient! Okay?” Song Qingshi saw that Yue Wuhuan was still a bit hesitant, so he swore, “You don’t need to be on guard. I promise, I won’t have inappropriate thoughts about you or do anything weird!”

Yue Wuhuan couldn’t say the same. He stared at Song Qingshi’s rosy lips in a daze and recalled his dream. He breathed around a lump in his

throat, forcing down those unsavory thoughts as he slowly untied his waist sash.

“If it’s you…you can touch.”

There were only faint marks left on his shoulders. His light, honey-gold skin seemed to exude a sweet perfume. His shoulder blades flexed, and the life seal rippled over them like the enchanting patterns on a butterfly’s wings. Powerful lines of muscle tensed around his thin waist. His perfection could stir desire in anyone.

Song Qingshi decided he’d better not underestimate human frailty in the face of temptation. He wrapped a towel around Yue Wuhuan. Then, he readied himself, used his powers to confirm where he’d insert each needle, and began.

“Do you feel anything?”

“Yes.”

“What are you feeling?”

“Sore, swollen, itchy…”

That was what Song Qingshi expected, so he relaxed and continued the treatment.

As he reached Yue Wuhuan’s shoulder blade, he spotted a red birthmark. It was shaped like a tiny phoenix. The life seal covered it, so it wasn’t apparent at first glance. Song Qingshi admired it for a moment.

“You have a pretty birthmark,” he blurted out.

“My mother had it too.” Childhood memories soothed Yue Wuhuan. “She was a dancer in the palace who came from overseas. I remember her red hair and golden eyes. After she caught my father’s eye, she became a concubine. I take after her.”

“You’re mixed? Your mother must be very beautiful.” Song Qingshi felt Yue Wuhuan relax, so he continued chatting. “Black and curly hair are dominant genes. You’re more likely to inherit black—well, dark, not really black—eyes. That’s why yours are dark gold like amber. They’re also called ‘angel eyes.’”

Yue Wuhuan had no idea what half of that meant. “My mother…was indeed beautiful.”

“What was she like?”

“Gentle. Everyone in the palace loved her.”

“Do you want to see her again?” A reunion might help him heal. “I can take you back.”

Yue Wuhuan fell silent. His voice wavered when he next spoke. “No need. She already passed.”

Song Qingshi hesitated, needle in hand. He’d screwed up again.

“They heard I looked like my mother and wanted to make her a slave too.” Yue Wuhuan spoke without emotion. He’d grown numb to this old hurt. “In order to save my mother, I agreed to do many things I didn’t want to do. They went anyway. But my country had been annihilated a few years prior. My royal father and my brother, the crown prince, died in battle. My mother and the empress committed suicide. They’re all dead. But I’m happy about that. They don’t have to suffer humiliation or see me this way…”

Song Qingshi felt his heart breaking. He couldn’t soothe such deep pain, but he at least wanted to give Yue Wuhuan a hug.

He reached out. He had barely touched Yue Wuhuan’s shoulder when he remembered Yue Wuhuan’s aversion to touch and retracted his hand. He picked up the gold needle again, telling himself things would get better.

Yue Wuhuan felt Song Qingshi move behind him and turned around. He suddenly noticed a patch of red peeking out from under Song Qingshi’s collar.

Yue Wuhuan’s eyes widened in disbelief, his mind drifting to where it shouldn’t. Before he could stop himself, he had torn open Song Qingshi’s collar. Dark red spots marred his collarbone under his snowy white robe. They were stark against his pale skin.

Song Qingshi didn’t struggle. He sat there obediently, allowing it with a confused expression. He couldn’t understand where this outburst had come from.

Yue Wuhuan’s breathing quickened. A fury he could not contain rose in his chest.

“What is *this*?”

Chapter 13

SONG QINGSHI rushed to explain his apparent injuries.

“These? They’re just marks left behind by the acupuncture needles. They’re not bug bites or anything. I have a lot of capillary vessels, so needles cause tiny bits of bleeding beneath the skin. But it doesn’t hurt or bother me at all. They’ll fade in a few days.”

Yue Wuhuan stared at the marks, then released Song Qingshi.

“You were injured testing out the acupuncture for me, then I overreacted.” Yue Wuhuan’s head drooped.

“How could a medical professional not try things on themselves now and then?” Song Qingshi said blithely. “Once you learn acupuncture, you’ll have to do it too. You can also practice on me if you need to.”

A funny thought occurred to him: Trying acupuncture on yourself was truly the first step toward learning it. You’d pair with a partner afterward, then attempt it for acne, weight loss, stomach pains, or even common colds. Some upperclassmen taught him to put a needle into the top of his head if he started to nod off while studying. Tired students often turned into porcupines before their finals.

The original Song Qingshi had also learned by performing acupuncture on himself. Mostly he wanted to know how it felt when the needle went in. He needed to know before he dared try it on anyone else.

Yue Wuhuan turned his back to Song Qingshi like he resented his having injured himself for his sake. His protagonist was a sweet little angel.

Song Qingshi sighed internally. Afraid that he was going to ruin something else, he started to explain medical theory while inserting needles into Yue Wuhuan’s skin. The beauty, too, turned into a porcupine. Once each needle was in the right pressure point, Song Qingshi poured his spiritual power through them as he focused the anesthesia on the smallest points possible. Then, he readied the meridian repair bath, adjusted the temperature, and asked Yue Wuhuan to get in.

Yue Wuhuan let out a muffled noise when he stepped in. The potent medicine rushed through his meridians, twisting his insides into a knot.

He finally knew what Song Qingshi meant. Though the acupuncture had decreased the pain, it was still painful enough that he gripped the sides of the vat. His face burned with exertion, and cold sweat dripped down his forehead.

“I can’t take away the pain completely.” Song Qingshi extended his senses to assess Yue Wuhuan’s interior. “The human body has many meridians. Once the medicine enters your system, it’s like breaking through a dam. You’ll feel every meridian burst open. That’s the only way for me to confirm whether or not they’ve opened. You can scream if it hurts. You only need to endure it for another hour.”

“Don’t worry, Zunzhu,” Yue Wuhuan panted. “You’ve done so much for me already. I can take this.”

As each meridian opened up and the medicine flowed through, the pain vanished. Song Qingshi removed the corresponding needles. As more and more meridians opened up, the overall ache lessened. After removing the last needle from the top of Yu Wuhuan’s skull, Song Qingshi brought out a pill.

“Open your mouth,” he commanded.

Pain had driven all thoughts from Yue Wuhuan’s head, so he opened his mouth obediently. Song Qingshi accidentally brushed his cool fingertips across his patient’s lips as he dropped the scorching pill on his tongue.

As if on instinct, Yue Wuhuan chased after those fingers, seeking that calming chill. He wanted to hold them in his mouth and never let go.

The pill melted and slid down his throat. Suddenly, an explosion of pain spiraled through his dantian to the rest of his organs. He couldn’t hold back a pained scream. He clutched at Song Qingshi before falling limp.

Song Qingshi steadied Yue Wuhuan in his arms, patting his back in consolation.

“That’s the nine-rotation blood-lotus pill. It’ll work fast, I promise. Bear with it for a moment.”

The bath cleared his meridians while the nine-rotation blood-lotus pill rebuilt his dantian. Song Qingshi had determined through taxing research and experiments that he couldn't decrease the pain caused by the pill, but at least it was fleeting. He hadn't told Yue Wuhuan beforehand in case it added to his stress. Best to get it over with, like getting a shot.

Yue Wuhuan had bitten his lips bloody. Unable to keep it in anymore, he groaned like a wounded animal. He clutched Song Qingshi as though he wanted them to become one.

If Song Qingshi hadn't achieved yuanying-level cultivation, his bones would've broken. He couldn't move, but Yue Wuhuan's bloody mouth concerned him. "If it hurts, bite something else. I'll give you a tow —"

Yue Wuhuan sank his teeth into the red marks on Song Qingshi's neck with such force, it seemed like he wanted to bite off a piece and swallow it.

Song Qingshi knew Yue Wuhuan wasn't in his right mind. Fearing he'd break his teeth, Song Qingshi dropped the protection he created around himself with his spiritual power. He didn't dare use poison to keep Yue Wuhuan away either. As a result, Yue Wuhuan's teeth left a deep, bloody mark that stung so much Song Qingshi's eyes welled with tears. He didn't dare cry out for fear he'd startle Yue Wuhuan—all he could do was gasp softly and pretend it didn't hurt.

Song Qingshi was the one that let Yue Wuhuan bite him. Even if the pain brought him to his knees, even if tears were swimming in his eyes, he'd ensure the treatment was completed. He'd bear with it.

After about ten minutes, the pain in Yue Wuhuan's meridians began to fade. A grain of spiritual power shot out, like a withered tree sprouting under spring rain. That sprout held the promise of new life. Just existing felt more comfortable and pleasant. Yue Wuhuan's strength faltered, and he relaxed his jaw. He weakly licked the bloody mark he'd left on Song Qingshi, then sank down into a deep sleep.

Yue Wuhuan woke in the dark.

As he shifted, he sensed his long-lost spiritual power was once again coursing through him, somehow stronger than when he first cultivated.

Suddenly, he noticed there was something beside him. Turning slowly to look, he realized his fingers were clenched around Song Qingshi's sleeve. It was quite difficult to let go after holding on to him for so long.

Song Qingshi was sleeping deeply. He had wanted to explain the rest of the treatment to Yue Wuhuan, but he'd been neglecting his rest as of late. As he waited, he'd fallen asleep.

His face was so unguarded like this.

Yue Wuhuan stared, a riot of emotions rippling through him. The seeds of longing were sprouting inside him while a wild storm roiled in his heart. He caressed a lock of Song Qingshi's soft hair and brought it to his nose to inhale that ever-present medicinal fragrance.

The bite mark on Song Qingshi's neck filled Yue Wuhuan with unspeakable satisfaction. It was like he'd marked him with his personal brand. No trace of drugs remained in Yue Wuhuan's body, but he couldn't curb his welling desire to possess Song Qingshi.

Song Qingshi was a good man. But Yue Wuhuan? He craved his love, his soul, his everything. What a shameful thought…

"Wuhuan, you're a monster born to accept others' desires."

Perhaps they were right. He'd been a monster for a long time, unworthy of anything pure.

Song Qingshi had done too much for Yue Wuhuan. He was deeply grateful, but had nothing to repay him with. He knew he shouldn't hunger, but he just couldn't let go.

He should, at least, stay a little further away from Song Qingshi. Yue Wuhuan would hide his tail, concealing his beastly side and the thoughts that would only taint Song Qingshi.

He breathed deep, then reluctantly let the lock of hair fall from his hand.

Chapter 14

THE CRIES OF the cicadas heralded warm weather. Quietly, summer crept in.

Song Qingshi's weasel-hair brush formed elegant lines on the rice paper. Each word of the medical record was legible and beautiful. It detailed everything: the earliest wound treatment, the medicines used to purge poison, reopening the meridians, and the dantian's reconstruction three months prior. He enumerated every step and every medicine used. The whole thing would be bound into a book for future reference.

But Song Qingshi had no idea how to start describing Yue Wuhuan's mental state. After a lot of hesitation, he'd only written a few short sentences in the file. What could he say?

Comparing the situation at the beginning to now, Yue Wuhuan *had* improved.

His daily routine was regular and kept him occupied. He'd found an unused sword in the treasury and woke every day before dawn to practice for four hours. After Song Qingshi washed up in the morning, they'd study medicine for another four hours. In the afternoon, they'd perform a dissection or craft experimental elixirs. In the evening, Yue Wuhuan dealt with matters of the valley estate, then trained his qi through four hours of meditation.

Cultivators didn't require much sleep, and Yue Wuhuan hated to waste time, so he only slept two to four hours a night. If Song Qingshi hadn't insisted on sharing meals, he'd have replaced food with a fasting elixir.

Song Qingshi never thought he'd see the day where *he* tried to convince someone to study a little less. But Yue Wuhuan said he'd already lost too much time, and he had to regain his losses somehow.

He'd already achieved the sixth level of the qi-gathering stage. Treatment had enhanced his natural talents, and he'd previously established a foundation. He would regain all that he had lost in no time.

Song Qingshi noted Yue Wuhuan's improving medical record and let him do as he wished.

With the arrival of summer, Song Qingshi discovered the benefits of ice silk. Even in his previous life, he'd preferred silk pajamas. He loved to drift off in the fabric's smooth, natural embrace. It was one of the few indulgences he cared about in his mostly unfussy life. The ice silk of the immortal realm put his world's silk to shame. It felt light as a feather on the skin and *very* smooth. Even in extreme heat, it stayed cool to the touch, sweeping away all excessive warmth.

He had the servants purchase a few bolts of plain ice silk to be made into pajamas. Every night, he wore a large, loose t-shirt with a comfortable scoop neck and baggy drawstring pants to bed. It was incredibly comfy.

He'd tried to recommend these modified pajamas to Yue Wuhuan, but after staring for a while, Yue Wuhuan had declined. Then he'd added another two hours of sword practice to his schedule.

Song Qingshi also wanted to cut off his hair. He wasn't used to wearing it long. He stayed at home and didn't want to spend time combing it each morning. Holding a pair of scissors, he stood in front of the mirror and made tentative cutting gestures before Yue Wuhuan found him.

He snatched the scissors out of Song Qingshi's hands and lost his temper for the first time.

"Zunzhu, what are you doing?!"

After hearing the reason, he scolded Song Qingshi at length.

"Your body and your hair are both precious. A man's hair can only be cut for three reasons." Yue Wuhuan fought to control his temper; his tone was quite severe. "One is to become a monk. Second is to pay for a crime. Third is if you're so arrogant you no longer care how this world sees you. Which would you prefer, Zunzhu?"

Song Qingshi shook his head frantically. "None of them. I just think I have too many baby hairs, and it's annoying to comb it."

Yue Wuhuan sighed in relief at Song Qingshi's explanation. "Let me try."

He grabbed the wooden comb from the table and poured a bit of orchid oil onto his palms. Then he slicked down Song Qingshi's flyaways and secured his hair in a long, thin braid. That done, Yue Wuhuan coiled the braid into a bun and topped it with a white jade hairpiece.

"How's this?" he asked. He let go reluctantly.

"Very nice. Your hands sure are nimble." Song Qingshi admired his orderly hair. "Wuhuan, should I find a female servant to do my hair for me?"

Yue Wuhuan paused with the comb still in hand. He tried to quiet the malice inside him.

"Zunzhu… You don't like when I do it? You'd pick someone else?"

Song Qingshi shook his head. "No! I just don't want to waste your talents on menial tasks."

"I owe you everything, and I lose sleep wondering how I can ever repay you," Yue Wuhuan said with a smile. "I'll rest easier if I can help you with anything at all."

Hearing that, Song Qingshi agreed without hesitation. "Well, if it's really not a hassle, I'll leave my hair in your hands."

Yue Wuhuan smoothed out the strands at Song Qingshi's temples and accepted the task with a smile.

When Yue Wuhuan was young, he'd worshipped his brother, the crown prince, who'd been known as the fiercest warrior in the land. He once saw his brother comb his wife's hair for her. He was so gentle, so careful. Yue Wuhuan couldn't fathom why his brother concerned himself with such things, but his brother chuckled at his question.

"It's said 'the hand that holds your comb also holds a deep affection, and each strand of your dark hair connects us to our past lives.' Little Wuhuan, when you grow up and find someone you love, you will also understand."

He really hadn't understood back then.

Now, he saw how one strand of hair drawn between his fingers could unravel his heart.

He pressed the wooden comb to his lips.

If I arrange your hair for the rest of this life, will it connect us in the next?

Song Qingshi had solved one problem, and he felt great.

“Do you want to come with me to Yue City in a few days?” he asked Yue Wuhuan. “I ordered a batch of custom instruments from the Pavilion of Heavenly Crafts. They’re fiddly and expensive, so the pavilion asked me to explain to them what I want in person, just to prevent any mistakes. Also, I heard there’s good food and wine in Yue City, and the Immortal Dance Pavilion’s entertainment is top-notch. Shall we see for ourselves?”

Some time had passed since the system had put him into this book, but he had been too busy treating his patient to explore. Although the original Song Qingshi’s memories were available to him, some things were still a mystery.

He’d only recently appreciated that he now had a long, healthy life ahead of him. He wasn’t rushed for time the way he had been in his original world. He didn’t have to race through his studies, fearing the day his body failed and he couldn’t save himself.

Everyday life bored most people, but now he could spare some time to experience all the fun, ordinary things he’d missed out on: eating food his doctors didn’t allow, doing things they didn’t recommend. He could even taste alcohol and figure out exactly why people loved it so much. He didn’t know if he would enjoy any of it, but he wanted to find out.

Imagining his future life, Song Qingshi felt a shiver of anticipation.

Inviting Yue Wuhuan to Yue City was just a start. He wanted them both to go outside before they became hermits. Song Qingshi also worried about his issues talking to strangers. The Pavilion of Heavenly Crafts could not understand medical jargon, so they hadn’t understood his requirements. Negotiations would be easier if Yue Wuhuan acted as his interpreter.

Yue Wuhuan considered it briefly, then agreed.

The day they set out for Yue City, Yue Wuhuan put on a veiled hat that covered his face.

“Are you afraid you’ll get a tan?” Song Qingshi asked.

Yue Wuhuan smiled. “You’ll understand soon, Zunzhu.”

Song Qingshi mulled it over before he settled on the obvious answer. Wuhuan was so beautiful, he must be afraid of unwanted attention!

Song Qingshi loaded himself up with weapons and poisons and ordered Yue Wuhuan to stay close. He devised a simple pepper spray for Yue Wuhuan that would render its targets blind for up to half a month. Yue Wuhuan accepted it gladly and put it with the other powders he’d made.

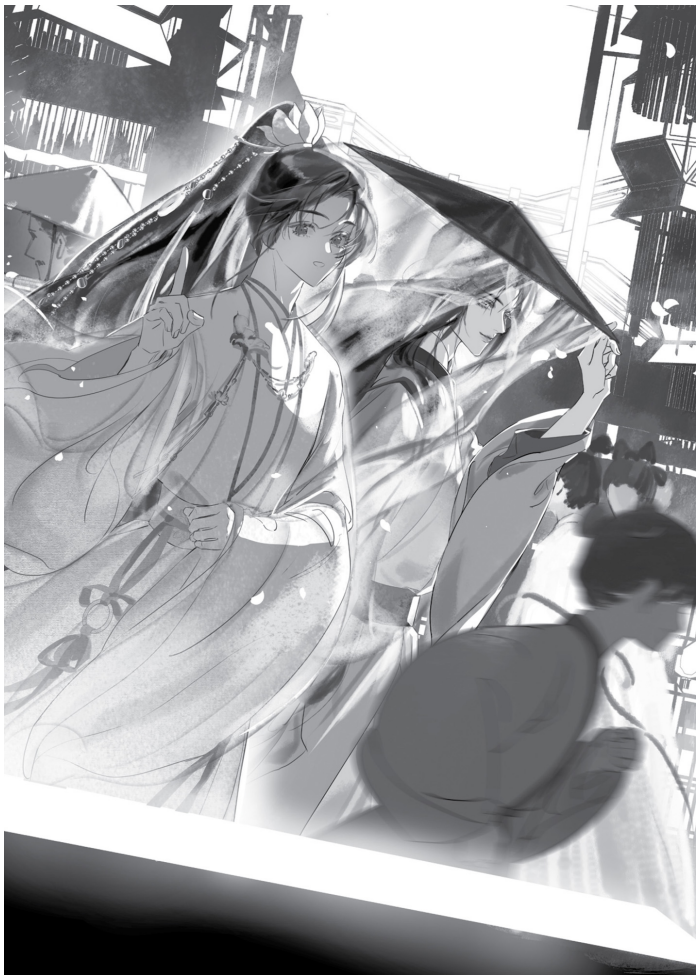
The two of them mounted a spirit beast and made for Yue City.

Yue City was the large city closest to the Medicine King’s Valley. It straddled both banks of a river and made a convenient port of call, so it had a lively, flourishing market. It boasted every amenity possible. Countless cultivators traveled to and from the city.

Song Qingshi felt like a country bumpkin seeing it for the first time. He’d need to sprout more eyeballs to take everything in. What were the golden fruit nectar and blue moon drinks those teahouse girls hawked? He wanted to try them both! What were those intriguing fruits at the produce stall? He should buy some to investigate! One vendor drew him in with singing paper men. Gorgeous women dressed as flying apsaras tempted brothel customers from the air. They fluttered around him with one inviting look after another. He watched for a long time, then extended his senses…

Yue Wuhuan couldn’t believe Song Qingshi would spare attention for something so common and vulgar. He simmered for a long time before he lost his patience and turned Song Qingshi around by the chin.

“Are they really so beautiful?” Yue Wuhuan demanded.



“There’s a yellow patch in that girl’s eye,” Song Qingshi whispered. He retracted his spiritual senses. “I think something might be wrong with her gallbladder.”

Yue Wuhuan stared at Song Qingshi in stunned silence. Why was he obsessed with eyes?!

Chapter 15

SONG QINGSHI had a sweet tooth, and since the temperature was rising day by day, he dragged Yue Wuhuan to a tea stall by the river that sold icy treats. They ordered a large bowl of ice cream and a lotus drink.

“Oh, right, I have a question.” Song Qingshi remembered that there was still a mystery in Yue Wuhuan’s medical records. “You don’t shed tears, but the test results show there’s nothing wrong with your lacrimal apparatus. What’s going on? Were you born that way?”

Yue Wuhuan had no interest in sweets, so he was only keeping Song Qingshi company. He picked at his ice cream, weighing the answer.

“No… I cried when I was little. But I didn’t like crying in front of others, so I would hide. At Phoenix Mountain I realized that if I cried when they hurt me, it would just excite them more. I learned to hold back my tears. It’s been so long, I can’t do it anymore.”

Human emotions could be taken away. An unethical psychological experiment had proven that. After being caged, Yue Wuhuan had denied himself the ability to cry through strict self-control and conditioning.

Song Qingshi no longer found his icy treat so sweet.

“It’s not so bad. You don’t need tears to survive.” Yue Wuhuan smiled nonchalantly and hurried to comfort him. “I’m glad there’s one thing the life seal can’t govern. Don’t worry about me, Zunzhu.”

“How can I not?” Song Qingshi parted Yue Wuhuan’s veil for a glimpse of those beautiful eyes. “If you’re happy, smile. If you’re sad, cry. They’re natural human reactions. Don’t worry, I’ll bring you to tears some day!”

Immediately he realized what he had said. Why would he promise to make someone cry? Song Qingshi slumped back down in his seat and tried to salvage the conversation.

“Well, it doesn’t have to be due to sadness. I cry when my feelings are too big.”

“Zunzhu, you cry when you’re emotional?” Yue Wuhuan licked his dry lips and felt a twisted sense of satisfaction. He leaned toward Song Qingshi and his clean scent, entering his personal space a little. Emboldened by the veil, he no longer concealed the desire in his gaze. He couldn’t help but speak in a coy tone. “Zunzhu, please make me cry out. I’m looking forward to it…”

“Leave it to me!” Song Qingshi promised, patting his own chest, relieved he hadn’t screwed up. He’d go forth and study psychological treatments diligently!

Yue Wuhuan didn’t know *why* he was smiling so much behind his veil.

Suddenly, they heard the sound of cultivators chatting and laughing from another room. Song Qingshi expanded his senses; he thought he’d heard them mention Golden Phoenix Mountain.

Two foundation-level rogue cultivators were gossiping next door. One used the sword and the other was a demonic cultivator. They weren’t ugly, but they discussed the latest news with no regard for tact.

“The Crazy Daoist really burned his bridge with Golden Phoenix Mountain. You know a few days ago, he beat the shit out of Master Jin?”

“It’s no wonder. I hear thirty years ago his kid, Lieyun-zhenren,[7] disappeared, and his sect’s treasure up and vanished with him. So for years the Crazy Daoist looks for the guy who did it, and he offers tons of cash for snitching. Finally, he finds this treasure, the Heartguard Tablet, was with Master Jin the whole time. He won’t stop until he gets justice.”

“I never thought Master Jin would stoop to murder just to steal something.”

“But we’re talking about the Heartguard Tablet here. It’s the most powerful artifact to help you survive a tribulation. Who wouldn’t want it?”

“Why couldn’t Master Jin piss off someone else? He had to go and get on the bad side of that overprotective lunatic…”

“Either way, it’s not over, since Master Jin wouldn’t admit to killing Lieyun-zhenren.”

Back at their table, Song Qingshi was seething.

“Once you’ve committed enough crimes, karma will deal with you. Trash.” Song Qingshi loathed Jin Feiren. He cursed him under his breath a few more times. Turning to Yue Wuhuan, he warned, “If the master of Golden Phoenix Mountain wants my help, just tell him I’m not there. I’ve isolated myself for cultivation or I’m out picking herbs. Make up a good excuse and let the head servant deal with him. You don’t have to put up with that asshole.”

Yue Wuhuan nodded obediently.

“Did you know about that Heartguard Tablet?” Song Qingshi couldn’t help asking.

“I was at Golden Phoenix Mountain for a decade, and the incident with Lieyun-zhenren happened thirty years ago.” Yue Wuhuan delivered this information with a smile. “Jin Feiren is very careful, and I was under the life seal’s control. Slaves have no way to learn any secrets.”

In actuality, Yue Wuhuan had spent a few years piecing together the whereabouts of the Heartguard Tablet from scant clues. Once he knew, he nudged an information broker, Tonggua-xianren,[8] toward the realization that Jin Feiren had also reached yuanying stage thirty years prior through a rather peculiar process. Tonggua-xianren cared more for money than his life. In public, he was respectful and on good terms with Jin Feiren. Privately, he nursed a grudge. He found proof of Jin Feiren’s transgression and sold the information straight to the Crazy Daoist for a high price.

Yue Wuhuan started planning his own death only after he confirmed the Crazy Daoist would investigate Jin Feiren. He endured two more years of torment with that victory as consolation.

Jin Feiren never would’ve expected the knife in his back from a slave who couldn’t choose his own words or deeds. What a pity the Crazy Daoist hadn’t killed him.

Yue Wuhuan tried not to dwell on it. He was afraid Song Qingshi wouldn’t admire his vicious, scheming side, so he donned his sheep’s clothing and ate his dessert obediently.

The two cultivators next door had moved on to the next topic of conversation: the Medicine King’s Valley.

“Everyone said the Medicine King was a well-respected master who longed for nothing. Who would’ve thought he was actually stupid?”

“Once his valley caught fire, it sure spread fast.”

Song Qingshi looked at Yue Wuhuan in confusion. He didn’t remember any fires in the Medicine King’s Valley.

Yue Wuhuan didn’t want him to hear such filth. “Zunzhu, I don’t want to stay here any longer.”

Song Qingshi got up to pay. He heard one of the cultivators chuckle.

“Who doesn’t know about Wuhuan-gongzi’s devastating looks? He’s got the Medicine King wrapped around his little finger with that and a few clever words.”

“Ha! Anyone who’s stepped foot in Golden Phoenix Mountain has seen that slut. Doesn’t matter how pretty he is. Master Jin still used him up and threw him away. Song-xianzun’s a recluse who doesn’t keep up with the news, so he’s the only one who can’t tell trash from treasure. But that Wuhuan-gongzi really is enticing. He can steal your soul. I bet Song-xianzun just can’t say no.”

“Heh, I’d like to see that for myself.”

Song Qingshi’s felt the blood drain from his face. Why hadn’t they left earlier? He glanced at Yue Wuhuan, but he couldn’t see his expression under the veil. After some thought, Song Qingshi decided he couldn’t run away. He had to respond like a man, so he rolled up his sleeves and decided to set the record straight.

Yue Wuhuan couldn’t stop him, so he could only let him go.

Song Qingshi puffed up his chest and approached the two cultivators with his chin held high, tabulating insults all the while. Telling himself it’d be fine, he slammed a hand down on the table.

The two cultivators turned toward this annoyance to see a skittish little cutie in snow-white robes. It was clear he was straining to conceal his anxiety. He stared at them, his lips parted but otherwise silent. It seemed like he was still gathering his words.

What was this? Had he come to flutter his eyelashes at them because their good looks had struck him dumb?

“I-I-I…” Song Qingshi stammered. He didn’t know how to curse. What would sound tough?

Most cultivators had no preference between men or women. The more the two men looked at Song Qingshi, the fonder they felt. His fresh, sweet face made an excellent palate cleanser for their vulgar appetites.

“Don’t rush. Take your time. Gege[9] will wait for you.”

“Okay. I’m not rushing.” Song Qingshi took a deep breath. He calmed down and turned serious. “Do you guys know who I am?”

The sword cultivator smiled, reaching for his hand. “No. Dare I ask this beauty’s name?”

“Medicine King’s Valley. Song Qingshi.” Song Qingshi seized his hand and squeezed. The man’s smile froze. “You guys talked about me earlier. The stupid one whose house was burning, remember?”

He crushed the cultivator’s wrist.

The demonic cultivator realized the trouble he was in and started to run away.

Song Qingshi peppered both men with poison needles. In an instant, a painful and itchy rash covered their bodies. They clawed at their skin until tears spilled down their faces. Song Qingshi forced them both to swallow a pill between screams of pain. Their cries became rasps, then dwindled away.

“For slandering the Medicine King’s Valley, you get seven days of pain and suffering. For speaking insolently, you get ten years of silence!”

After coldly announcing the consequences, he left the two offenders rolling around on the floor and returned to Yue Wuhuan. He thought he had done quite well establishing dominance. He looked to Yue Wuhuan with a hopeful smile.

Yue Wuhuan had known what those two intended for Song Qingshi from the start. Grappling with his self-control, he grabbed the hand Song Qingshi had used to touch the sword cultivator and dragged him to the well.

Yue Wuhuan wouldn’t stop scouring Song Qingshi’s hand and wrist with soap.

“Don’t touch such filthy things! They’re not clean…”

Song Qingshi watched in bewildered silence.

Yue Wuhuan kept scrubbing for a while until he came back to his senses. He’d gone overboard, hadn’t he? He thought about it, then lifted his veil to reveal a sheepish smile.

“If we get the lamb dish at the Pavilion of Heavenly Fragrance later, we’re supposed to eat it with our hands. You’ve touched poison and other people. It’s best to be clean, after all.”

Song Qingshi swelled with pride. Yue Wuhuan had developed the habits of a medical student!

Chapter 16

ACTUALLY, SONG QINGSHI didn't like lamb that much, and he enjoyed spicy food even less. But his little angel wanted some, so he would make it happen.

The two of them enjoyed a leisurely lunch before they strolled to the Pavilion of Heavenly Crafts.

The master of the Pavilion greeted them politely, but he wore an ugly expression.

That was when Song Qingshi learned that "just to prevent any mistakes" actually meant they "didn't understand anything" and "were completely baffled." The craftsmen were at the ends of their ropes!

"It's just a microscope, test tubes, some lab flasks, a distiller, a pressure gauge, and an infrared spectrometer. What don't they understand?" Song Qingshi was lost. He hadn't asked for a mass spectrometer or high-performance liquid chromatography system. These were basic instruments. "The microscope's like a really powerful magnifying glass. It can see germs."

What in the world was a magnifying glass? What were germs? Were they used for killing or spying?

The master of the Pavilion of Heavenly Crafts felt his soul start to leave his body. He began to doubt his purpose in life.

The two of them continued to make efforts to establish communication without success.

Fortunately, Yue Wuhuan's studies had given him an understanding of the mysterious artifacts in question. Since Song Qingshi was having a hard time, Yue Wuhuan volunteered to explain. He had a better grasp on how immortals thought, and he changed tactics accordingly.

At last, the master of the Pavilion of Heavenly Crafts ascertained that the microscope was an artifact used to see tiny poison particles; test tubes

and flasks were precious decorations; and the distiller was a kettle used to purify water.

Song Qingshi watched their negotiations, dumbfounded. There was something off about all of those descriptions, but none of it was wrong—*technically*.

Finally, the master of the Pavilion of Heavenly Crafts thumped his chest, promising he could make the requested objects.

With that decided, Yue Wuhuan immediately switched to haggling. After going back and forth for over an hour, he found the master of the Pavilion of Heavenly Crafts' lowest pricing limit. With Song Qingshi's permission, he sweetened the deal with some common medicines produced by the Medicine King's Valley to bring the price down further, scoring a great deal. He even acquired a long-term partnership with the Pavilion of Heavenly Crafts and ensured the contract was without loopholes. Song Qingshi loved having a competent secretary!

He didn't look at the final contract. He just signed at the bottom.

It was already dark outside when he left the Pavilion of Heavenly Crafts in a daze. Shops were lighting their lanterns one by one. There was still an endless stream of customers. Pleasure-seekers crowded the brothels, gambling houses, and the streets. The occasional sounds of fighting could be heard.

Song Qingshi had never stepped foot in a red-light district before, and he stared at everything with wide eyes. Every so often, a sex worker flirted with him, or a beauty would throw themself at Yue Wuhuan, drawn by his fine figure. This all made Song Qingshi incredibly uncomfortable. He hurried to duck inside the Night Rain Pavilion's main hall. Under his veil, Yue Wuhuan's expression relaxed.

Night Rain Pavilion sold information and posted bounties from its location in the red-light district. Its rules stated that information seekers must come alone. Song Qingshi asked Yue Wuhuan to stay put and walked deeper into the building. The master of the pavilion received him personally in an inner room.

Ye Lin was a fat, friendly man with a good temper. He smiled at everyone, but he genuinely enjoyed Song Qingshi's company. The original

had once tended to his injuries, so whenever news of rare, precious medicines or elixirs arrived at Night Rain Pavilion, he offered it to Song Qingshi first.

He had heard that Song Qingshi was bending over backward for a beautiful man, which sounded out of character. Mentioning his concerns outright lacked refinement, and the method he'd discovered for lifting the life seal was quite troublesome. He'd withheld the information for a few months, in case the Medicine King was an impulsive man, grew tired of this beauty, and changed his mind. It would save everyone a lot of hassle and money.

Now, Song Qingshi sat before him, urging him to share the news. Ye Lin didn't delay any further.

"I only received word in the past few days. When Huanxi-xianzun first created the life seal, he did not leave behind a way to reverse it. Then came an epidemic of demonic cultivators enslaving lower-level cultivators. Plenty were even the disciples of large sects. Those sects developed two ways to break the seal. Fenshen-level cultivators or higher can remove it directly—or you can draw an array with spirit essence and combine it with the spell used to make the seal. They will cancel each other out."

"Which one is easier?" Song Qingshi asked.

Ye Lin winced. "Zunzhu, you know that fenshen-level masters are the pillars of their sects. They won't show their faces for just anything. If you ask one to absolve a mortal of their life seal, they'll see it as an insult." He was tempted to ask: *If a pilgrim to the Medicine King's Valley begged you to save their pet, wouldn't you throw them out?*

Song Qingshi decided after a moment's consideration. "I'll try the second method." He wouldn't let Yue Wuhuan suffer further humiliation.

Ye Lin sighed and dealt the next blow.

"Spirit essences…are priceless. Only one appears at a time, and only in areas with concentrated spiritual power. Occasionally, you'll find them at an auction. The price depends on grade and size, but even so, you'll need to spend at least ten to thirty thousand high-quality spirit crystals. This method only exists because someone sealed the daughter of the Golden Jade Pavilion's master, and he had to find a way to reverse it, no matter the cost.

It’s an exorbitant expense, so no one bothered to keep it a secret. That’s why I’m telling you for free. Whoever seals a slave imprints them with a secret spell. You’ll have to write that on the array. If you want Xie Que’s spell, be prepared. He’ll wring you for every cent.”

The Medicine King’s Valley regularly spent its money on medicinal and herbal research, and they didn’t prioritize sales. They weren’t wealthy.

Yue Wuhuan was a rare beauty, but he was just an escort—one with a terrible reputation, at that. Was it worth it to spend that much to free him? Had Song Qingshi been drugged?

“Listen. If you really like his company, just treat him well, and don’t use the seal,” Ye Lin said. “What’s the difference? Golden Hoop Pavilion’s about to sell this gorgeous pair of sisters, and they’re both virgins! They’re asking fifty thousand crystals, and those two aren’t any less beautiful than __”

Song Qingshi stopped him. “I’ll buy spirit essence. Do you know where I can get it?”

He didn’t know how to communicate with cultivators. This had nothing to do with whether or not he was going to use the seal. The seal itself signified humiliation. It deprived those who bore it of the right to their own body. If he left it intact, Yue Wuhuan’s mental state would never fully recover.

Ye Lin surrendered. “Mistress Lingmiao has collected a few but I don’t know if she’s willing to sell.”

Song Qingshi took a brief mental inventory of his assets. “I’m willing to make her a bottle of youth-restoring elixir *and* throw in twenty thousand spirit crystals.”

Though Mistress Lingmiao was incredibly skilled, she had started cultivating later than most. She established a foundation at thirty and developed a golden core at forty. That she looked much older than other female cultivators was her greatest insecurity. She hid her appearance with antiaging elixirs and continued to seek the youth elixir that could permanently return her to her youthful look. Only the Medicine King possessed the long-lost formula, but the original had refused to make it for her; it insulted his sensibilities, wasted his time and materials, and was

medically unnecessary. If he changed his mind, Mistress Lingmiao would definitely be tempted.

"I'll set that up for you," Ye Lin said, though it pained him to think about it. "Oh, right. Did you know Xie Que got into trouble recently?"

Song Qingshi furrowed his brow. "What kind of trouble?"

Ye Lin spoke like it was just a trivial story. "You know the master of Golden Phoenix Mountain has a new favorite? He dotes on him like no other. I think his name is Bai Zihao… Well, they learned he's the Pine Crane master's bastard son whom he left in the mortal realm, and Xie Que sold him into slavery. There's been a lot of back and forth with no solution, and Pine Crane Sect can't do anything about Golden Phoenix Mountain, so they're after Xie Que for revenge. But he skipped town, and nobody knows where he's hiding."

Song Qingshi lowered his head and remained deep in thought for a long time.

"Don't worry," Ye Lin said with a little laugh. "If I find Xie Que, I'll try to learn Yue Wuhuan's life seal spell and sell it to you at a discount."

"No need," said Song Qingshi. "I'll pay double if you tell me his location."

Ye Lin froze, realizing something, then made a noise of agreement and picked up his teacup.

Song Qingshi ended their appointment with a bow and left with his companion, who had been studying the task assignment board.

Ye Lin shook his head, watching them depart from the window. He retrieved a book of illustrations from a hidden compartment on his bookshelf, flipped through it, and sighed.

That Wuhuan-gongzi sure has his ways.

The Medicine King's reputation was about to go down the drain.

He'd tackled all his tasks, and now he had a lead on how to undo the life seal.

Song Qingshi ambled down the streets with Yue Wuhuan in tow, stopping often to buy books, medicine, and daily necessities.

The red brocade suits Wuhuan! Buy!

The dragon grass could supplement Wuhuan's medicine! Buy! Buy!

The milk cake at Honor Pastry House tastes divine, and Wuhuan likes it! Buy! Buy! Buy!

Song Qingshi ventured out to shop only a few times a year, and every time, he would return home with nearly half a year's worth of supplies. He lost himself in the joys of shopping and even bought a couple of bottles from the wine shop on the side of the road. This vintage bore an enticing name, Worry Not, and the woman selling it swore it could soothe any trouble. Although Song Qingshi had very clear goals and not many worries, he could still try it.

All in all, he bought a whole bunch of random things.

Yue Wuhuan packed his haul in an interspatial bag with some misgivings. He'd have to sort through the goods when they got back.

At one point, Song Qingshi spotted a bookstore in the alleyway, and dashed inside. Buying books was his favorite hobby—the more the better.

Yue Wuhuan hesitated at the entrance before he caught up.

Business was booming at Immortal Love Books. Customers crowded the aisles. Song Qingshi emptied the medical section, then topped the stack with an almanac of the immortal realm. Next, he grabbed a copy of whatever looked popular. Male customers thronged to a stack of one colorful, illustrated volume in the corner. Seven or eight out of every ten bought a copy.

"What are those?" Song Qingshi asked.

Yue Wuhuan looked at him uneasily, not knowing how to answer.

Song Qingshi wound between the men and grabbed a copy of the book, which was titled *Beauties of the Golden Age*.

"Oh, it's a collection of prints in the ukiyo-e style. What intricate printing. A famous master must have done this, right?"

He flipped to a page at random, then dropped the book like he had been burned. The book fell to the floor, revealing its contents. His entire body shuddered. It was as if he'd just plunged into icy waters. He took another disbelieving glance.

This was a book of pornography! Sordid words and scenes of filth sullied every page. *Sensual Blossoms at the Night Banquet*, *Splendor of the Golden Feathers*, *Favoring Wuhuan-gongzi*…

The illustrations detailed every angle of a debauched youth with gorgeous phoenix eyes. The red beauty mark below his left eye demanded desire and attention.

Yue Wuhuan.…

Song Qingshi knew what Yue Wuhuan had experienced, but he'd never seen it for himself. As Yue Wuhuan slowly recovered, Song Qingshi had hoped the memories would fade with time and Yue Wuhuan could ignore them like an ostrich that had buried his head in the sand. But this book had ripped open the old wound, revealing everything to the world. Yue Wuhuan had borne a hell worse than Song Qingshi's imaginings.

Why were people so *evil*?

Song Qingshi clutched his own shoulders and sucked down lungful after lungful of air. The shopkeeper approached them with a greeting, but fled when he saw Song Qingshi's distress. Flames of the underworld crawled over the filthy pages.

It crumbled to ash.

Now what? What should he do? What *could* he do? Nothing.

Song Qingshi stood locked in place, feeling like all his energy had been sapped away. In the end, he was so numb that Yue Wuhuan had to drag him away.

Yue Wuhuan held his hand as they plodded to the river. As the cold breeze blew over them, Song Qingshi's mind cleared. He understood now what those two cultivators in the teahouse had meant, and why Ye Lin had hinted he should give up.

Everyone knew…

Golden Phoenix Mountain ruined Yue Wuhuan's body. The book ruined his reputation.

No matter how hard Yue Wuhuan worked, whether he established a foundation or cultivated a golden core, even if he reached the yuanying stage and the pinnacle of swordplay, no one would note his shocking talent. Instead, they would only see his body and those scenes of debauchery. They'd see him as a discarded toy who had been used for sick games. Song Qingshi could destroy a bookstore or two and burn a mountain of books for Yue Wuhuan, but he would never stop those prints from circulating the market.

Yue Wuhuan had said he had nothing left, but now Song Qingshi saw how deep the despair behind those words was.

He sat by the river with his face in his hands. Tears dripped between his fingers. He felt powerless.

"Zunzhu, don't be sad." Yue Wuhuan sat down and spoke in a gentle, soothing tone. "I didn't want to hide it from you. You'd have found out sooner or later. Those prints were made a few years ago. The most famous illustrator in the immortal realm came to Golden Phoenix Mountain. Jin Feiren drugged me and forced me to model through the life seal, so the prints could be spread throughout the world. Now that I think of it, he probably knew I wanted to run away. He told me that no matter where I fled, I'd never escape my fate as a slave…so I gave up. I became the thing he wanted: shameless, indulgent, a laughable fool…"

Song Qingshi couldn't face him and kept his eyes fixed on the river.

"Zunzhu gave me a new chance at life." Yue Wuhuan's tone was very light. "I've put the past behind me. I've had time to come to grips with these things, and I'm prepared. I'll find some way to assume a new identity, and no one will recognize me. So it's okay. I'm really okay."

Song Qingshi was still very upset. This beautiful, proud phoenix would never fly in the sky again.

Once Song Qingshi had calmed down slightly, he moved to stand up —until he noticed Yue Wuhuan was trembling.

He had taken off his veiled hat. Even in the darkness, it was clear his beautiful eyes were filled with fear. It took all of his energy to spit out the

words he dreaded uttering:

“Please, don’t hate me for being so dirty.”

Chapter 17

THAT NIGHT, Song Qingshi latched onto Yue Wuhuan tightly to comfort him. He rambled the whole time, stumbling over his words. Philosophy, medicine, and sociology took their turn at the lectern, and when he got excited, even English, German, and Latin delivered guest lectures. Never mind that Yue Wuhuan didn't understand. Song Qingshi himself barely even knew what he was talking about.

At least he had the right attitude.

Yue Wuhuan had recovered his composure quite a while ago. He relished Song Qingshi's comforting medicinal scent and sometimes nodded his assent to an unintelligible but calming phrase. He couldn't help the upward curve of his lips, but it did taste a little bitter.

He had always known his peace would end. At some point, someone would reveal the truth to Song Qingshi in order to sow discord between them. Even if Song Qingshi hadn't discovered the book, Yue Wuhuan would've engineered its "accidental" discovery. Then, he could've come clean while Song Qingshi still liked him, and garnered some empathy and a promise. That way, no one could use it against him.

How laughable. He'd thought he'd prepared himself, but when Song Qingshi opened the book, Yue Wuhuan had been so embarrassed he hadn't known what to do with himself. Even worse, Song Qingshi's eyes still only held fury and sympathy—not a single hint of desire.

Their feelings for each other were too different.

Song Qingshi appreciated, adored, and protected him.

He wanted to possess, conquer, and control Song Qingshi.

Yue Wuhuan sniffed the ends of Song Qingshi's hair. Desire overwhelmed him. Why had this man shown an even better side of himself every time Yue Wuhuan tested him?

How was he supposed to let go? Why couldn't they have met when he was pure and clean?

Yue Wuhuan's heart boiled with poison. He despised Xie Que, Jin Feiren, and everything else that tainted him. He hated the disgusting world. He wanted to scour the world of everything outside the Medicine King's Valley, so only a single patch of clean earth remained. One person was enough for him.

After that incident, the two of them gave up on exploring Yue City further. They rested for the night, and the next morning, they returned to Song Qingshi's valley.

Along the way, Song Qingshi considered ways to change Yue Wuhuan's appearance and conceal his identity. He even considered plastic surgery, but he couldn't bear to damage that beautiful face.

Suddenly, the sounds of a fierce battle erupted from the woods.

Song Qingshi stopped his beast, only to see two cultivators with golden cores fighting for their lives. Their weapons darted left and right as their auras surged around them. After about half an hour, the cultivator in black was felled by the other. The victor stripped him of his weapon and pouch, then left on his sword in a hurry.

Murder and plunder was a common sight in the immortal realm. No one would identify the cultivators or know what spurred the deadly conflict. No one would involve themselves, unless they knew either party.

Song Qingshi felt reluctant to involve himself in other people's matters too. He readied his spirit mount to leave.

Yue Wuhuan stopped him. "Zunzhu, let's take a look. Perhaps he's not dead yet."

He guided his beast toward the black-robed cultivator, and Song Qingshi rushed after him.

Although the unconscious man was still breathing, he was heavily injured. Seven or eight sword slashes had laid him open, and it was apparent there was organ damage. If they did nothing, he'd die soon.

To avoid unnecessary trouble, the Medicine King's Valley never accepted anonymous patients. Song Qingshi furrowed his brow, hesitating, as Yue Wuhuan knelt down and pulled on his gloves.

He carefully examined the man’s wounds. “Zunzhu, I’ve learned how to suture, and you’ve taught me some trauma medicine, but I lack any hands-on experience. Can we take this man back to the valley so I can practice treating wounds on him?”

Despite his dark past, the main character remained kind. Perhaps he might even become a famous doctor in the future. The thought made Song Qingshi emotional, so he immediately agreed. After he assisted Yue Wuhuan with some basic first aid, they put the man on his spirit beast and took him home.

In the Medicine King’s Valley, Song Qingshi settled the patient in a quiet room.

This was Yue Wuhuan’s first patient, so he was extra attentive. Not only did he sew together all his wounds, he even boiled the medicine himself and fed it to the patient. He also recorded the patient’s vitals at regular intervals. Song Qingshi offered occasional guidance when Yue Wuhuan feared missing some tiny detail. Song Qingshi marveled at his talent. He grasped everything with minimal instruction, and with every step, he strived for perfection. Even his medical records were well-written. There was nothing Song Qingshi could criticize. Once the patient showed clear signs of improvement, he left everything to Yue Wuhuan, assured of his success.

The black-robed cultivator woke three days later. Smelling the fragrance of medicine, he strained to sit upright, before finding the bandages immobilizing his torso, which meant he had been saved. He looked up to thank his savior, and laid eyes on the most bewitching face he’d ever seen.

“Y-you’re the one who saved me?” the cultivator mumbled.

“Greetings, Xianzhang.” Yue Wuhuan had stayed at his bedside for a long time. He bowed.

The cultivator’s name was She Yun. He was a demonic cultivator of little import. Two years ago, he’d had the chance to visit Golden Phoenix Mountain as a guest. His status wouldn’t normally afford him the use of a slave at Yue Wuhuan’s level, but that night, the beauty hadn’t served his

customers to their satisfaction. As punishment, he was drugged and given to them to do with as they saw fit.

Unfocused phoenix eyes, an enchanting mole, a sultry voice, and a seal of confinement. She Yun couldn't forget that night of pleasure. He'd sought it everywhere but hadn't tasted it since.

She Yun stared at Yue Wuhuan, his throat drying up. Under the life seal's control, a slave could not harm anyone. So what was this beauty after by saving him? Yue Wuhuan couldn't possibly remember him.

She Yun watched Yue Wuhuan pour out the medicine he'd been warming in a little kettle. He helped She Yun drink, then bade him keep his mouth open.

"The medicine is bitter. Here, Xianzhang, have a candy."

With his slender, pale fingers, he placed the candy in She Yun's mouth, where it dissolved in an instant. The candy tasted peculiar, almost as bitter as the medicine. Yue Wuhuan's beautiful eyes looked at him with such tenderness and anticipation. Soon, She Yun felt dizzy and unable to think.

Without another word, Yue Wuhuan rose to clean the room. He piled all the trash into a corner, leaving the little desk and chair clear, then put on a pair of gloves made of thin hide.

"Do you remember me?" She Yun asked eagerly.

Yue Wuhuan returned, his eyes sparkling. "Xianzhang, you treated this slave so well. How could I forget?"

He had once been like a flower, snipped by a gardener to perfection. Although he was stunning, it was artificial. Now, he had his own colors, and it had made him even more eye-catching and beautiful than he'd been three years ago. If Jin Feiren ever found out he'd let such a heavenly creature out of his grasp, he'd surely regret it.

She Yun's mouth felt dry. Blood raced in his veins, and limpness swept through him.

Yue Wuhuan's enchanting smile grew. "Xianzhang, let's relive that pleasure. What do you say?"

“Yes. I love you.” She Yun’s heart galloped. He couldn’t believe that such a beauty had fallen into his lap. “If your master cast you off, I can take you home.”

Yue Wuhuan laughed as if he’d heard a delightful joke. He had stuck a silencing array on the door. Taking an odd assortment of little tools from a pouch, he arranged them on the table: a small knife, scissors, pliers, a saw, and some other daunting instruments She Yun couldn’t name.

Yue Wuhuan introduced them one by one. “This is a scalpel. These are surgical scissors and bone shears. These are forceps…”

Suddenly realizing something was wrong, She Yun started to struggle, but his body wouldn’t obey. He couldn’t so much as twitch.

“You swallowed a puppet pill. It’s not a complete success, so I can’t control your movements. This is enough, though.” Yue Wuhuan pulled on an outer robe and a mask. Picking up his knife, he asked sweetly, “You can feel everything, right? Other than being immobile.”

She Yun was both shocked and furious. “You’re not being controlled by the seal anymore?”

Yue Wuhuan laughed mockingly. Not a drop of human sympathy showed in his eyes, only lunacy and thirst.

“Please. Please, don’t do this.” She Yun finally figured out what Yue Wuhuan intended. He screamed for mercy. “Let me go!”

This night was just like that one. A demon faced a helpless lamb. It offered no pity—only cruelty and disregard. Each heavy strike of the blade drew a scream.

“Is it fun being played with?”

The demon repeated the words he’d been offered that night:

“Come on, let me enjoy the pleasure I deserve…

“Use your filthy body to please me.

“Scream louder, like you really love it!”

Unclean blood dripped from Yue Wuhuan’s hands, but his heart was satisfied. He really had gone mad.

Deep into the night, Song Qingshi was still sitting on the library daybed, reading. Without him noticing, Yue Wuhuan had crept in. He leaned against the doorframe, watching Song Qingshi. At some point, he’d showered, changed into a single red robe, and tied up his damp hair. The scent of orchids and herbs trailed after him, and he seemed to be in a good mood.

Song Qingshi gestured for him to approach. “Bathing so late? Careful not to catch a cold.”

“My clothes got dirty, so I washed them.” Yue Wuhuan sat on the bed meekly and flipped through a book at random. “I can’t sleep. Can I read a while with you?”

Song Qingshi welcomed him, pushing a platter of snacks toward him.

“Oh, by the way,” Yue Wuhuan said. “A few days ago, that cultivator we saved woke up. He insisted on leaving, so I let him go.”

“He left? But his wounds hadn’t healed, had they?”

“He seemed to have something on his mind. I didn’t dare ask.”

Song Qingshi offered some comfort. “We can’t force patients to stay. I suppose we’ll leave him be.”

Yue Wuhuan smiled. “It’s okay. He paid me back, so it’s not like we owe each other.”

Well, if Yue Wuhuan wasn’t bothered, Song Qingshi could set the matter aside. He focused on his book. Yue Wuhuan leaned into him lazily, breathing in his scent, satisfied.

His murderous urges gradually faded away. This was his territory, clean and pure.

Chapter 18

SONG QINGSHI PRESSED his hands together and assumed a worshipful expression.

“My babies are here!”

Yue Wuhuan was confused. Then he looked down at the cage in his hands, where six white mice were scampering around. Song Qingshi must have meant them. Yue Wuhuan quickly put the cage down on the lab table.

“Zunzhu, these arrived from the master of Night Rain Pavilion. Are they some kind of rare spirit creature?”

“These…are mice! I asked him to find some in the mortal realm. It took some effort.” Song Qingshi leaned in close. He couldn’t get enough of those cute little guys and their antics. “Wuhuan, did you know mice and humans share 98 percent of their DNA? That’s why they’re the most popular animal for testing.”

Yue Wuhuan’s beautiful eyes widened as he stared in disbelief at the nasty little mice in their enclosure. How could those things share 98 percent of anything with him?

“Right now, we only have these few that are wild-caught. We’ll start breeding them to produce subtypes: a control population, ones free of specific pathogens, germ-free ones… We might even be able to breed them with higher or lower incidences of cancer or diabetes, that sort of thing.”

Song Qingshi seemed to glow when he spoke of his beloved vermin.

He continued rambling like it didn’t matter if Yue Wuhuan understood. “It’ll probably take a few dozen years. Good thing cultivators have long lifespans. Is the breeding room ready? I’ll be living in the lab starting today! These guys are delicate. I don’t know if they’ll acclimate to the immortal realm. I need to make sure nothing happens to them and that they breed. They’ll basically be my entire life.”

Once, Song Qingshi had had an upperclassman who’d been doing research abroad. She’d spent four years establishing a research population,

and almost had results, when her host country experienced political unrest. She feared for her life and called multiple times a day about her situation. Everyone begged her to give up on her experiment and come home, but she broke into a flood of tears, crying that the mice were her entire life; she couldn't leave without them. From then on, Song Qingshi and his fellow students had called their lab mice their "entire lives."

Yue Wuhuan recalled a rumor he'd once heard. "Zunzhu, mice *aren't* human, no matter how similar we are. Raising them sounds like a hassle. Why don't you experiment on people? Don't all apothecaries do the same?"

"Of course I'll do human tests eventually." Song Qingshi's solitary focus was his mice. "I'll use mice and other animals to confirm that medicines are safe before I try them on people. My teacher tested things on himself before he asked for volunteers. I took part in a few studies too. It's a convenient way to confirm their efficacy."

He admired his teacher. He was a well-respected academic, genuinely concerned with the public good, who practiced scrupulous ethics and only cared about improving the lives of others. Hippocrates called medicine the noblest of all arts. As long as the research of medicine created one new advancement, it saved countless patients from suffering—and sometimes altered the course of history. What a beautiful thing. Looking at his little white mice, Song Qingshi saw the light of a bright future.

Yue Wuhuan didn't speak up for some time, deep in thought, and when he did speak, he was hesitant. "If your teacher tried that many medicines…is he still alive and well?"

"He's in another world, now," Song Qingshi answered truthfully.

"Z-Zunzhu, please let me try your medicines in the future," Yue Wuhuan said. His face had gone pale.

"Okay, after I try them and make sure they're safe." Song Qingshi showered him with praise. "Wuhuan, you're so well-suited to the life of medicine. You're smart, kind, and your heart's full of love. You'll definitely accomplish great things in the future."

Song Qingshi was also great, even if he was a little blind to Yue Wuhuan's flaws.

The servants had whispered to Yue Wuhuan that, while the Medicine King was obsessed with his work, spent entire days in research, and spoke and acted in bizarre ways, he'd seemed a little more human since Yue Wuhuan had arrived at the valley. He no longer raged at the smallest inconvenience or conducted cruel experiments. He afforded Yue Wuhuan trust and adoration he'd never shown to anyone before.

Yue Wuhuan nursed a tiny hope. Today, that hope grew.

If he doesn't think the mice are dirty, then maybe…

"Zunzhu, I can take care of that for you." Yue Wuhuan tugged on Song Qingshi's sleeve. "I'm very suitable for testing medicine. Let me spend my life doing trials for you, just like your mice, all right? I'm not afraid of dying. Please don't hurt yourself."

The word "dying" alarmed Song Qingshi. The threat of failing this course loomed overhead once more. He reviewed their conversation, found the sore spot, then swore that both the mice *and Yue Wuhuan* were his life. They held the same importance in his heart. And while his teacher was in another world, it wasn't because something happened to him while testing medicine. Under Song Qingshi's careful control, no one was going to die.

This satisfied Yue Wuhuan.

Knowing that he might be busy sometimes, Song Qingshi handed Yue Wuhuan a thick book on mice breeding and asked for his help. Yue Wuhuan accepted the book and the cage with utmost solemnity, swearing that he'd take good care of Song Qingshi's "entire life."

A servant brought over a letter from Night Rain Pavilion and the invoice for the mice. They were ordinary creatures, but no one in the immortal realm had ever seen one before. Because of their tiny size, they were hard to locate, and finding them had required considerable manpower and time with minimal results. In the end, they had to be sourced from an uninhabited island overseas.

Each mouse ended up costing a hundred high-grade spirit crystals.

"Worth it." Song Qingshi paid without hesitation.

Yue Wuhuan fretted a while before asking, "Zunzhu, did you not look at the ledger I gave you a few days ago?"

Song Qingshi had no interest in accounting, so he had forgotten about the ledger almost as soon as Yue Wuhuan had given it to him. He took a cursory glance to satisfy Yue Wuhuan and could only stare in horror. The Medicine King's Valley's accounts were in the negative! He gaped at the offending number, waiting for his all-powerful secretary's explanation.

"You custom-ordered many unique, expensive instruments from the Pavilion of Heavenly Crafts," Yue Wuhuan said with a sigh. "You also purchased precious herbs in bulk. Most importantly, there's an unattributed expense for twenty thousand top-quality spirit crystals…"

Song Qingshi gulped. His parents had been rich, so he only ever concerned himself with spending. He had no idea how financials worked, and his parents doted on him. Even when he spent thousands upon thousands to fund his medical research, his parents never said a thing. He had a well-equipped personal lab, so he never considered how much research actually cost.

Now that Song Qingshi was here and had Yue Wuhuan to organize his finances, Yue Wuhuan had found plenty of ways to make extra income. Song Qingshi thought that meant his future was secured, so he'd purchased things without worry. He'd never dreamed he'd squander everything!

Still, he couldn't let Yue Wuhuan know what those twenty thousand spirit crystals had funded. It would put unnecessary pressure on him. Plus, it was supposed to be a surprise.

He obviously intended to avoid the matter of the twenty thousand spirit crystals, so Yue Wuhuan dropped it.

"Zunzhu, don't worry. It'll take time to realize a profit. I'll think of something to help until then."

Yue Wuhuan hadn't blamed him, but Song Qingshi felt culpable. It had been a long time since he'd paid any attention to the valley's general affairs. In order to avoid Golden Phoenix Mountain, he'd even pretended to be in isolation and not accepting patients. All day, every day, he just spent time in his lab and library, enjoying himself.

It was Yue Wuhuan who had taken time from his training to care for the things his teacher preferred to neglect. He helped Song Qingshi make money *and* take care of his daily needs. He'd been managed so effectively

he’d forgotten it was his own responsibility. Instead, he’d added to Wuhuan’s many woes.

“It’s all my fault,” Song Qingshi said, his voice apologetic as he tugged on Yue Wuhuan’s sleeve. “I won’t spend indiscriminately anymore. I don’t need ice silk pajamas or sweets. I’ll stop ordering lab equipment and take some rich patients. Until then, I’ll live frugally, and I’ll work hard to provide for you, so you don’t have to work so hard.”

Yue Wuhuan’s beauty was unparalleled, as were his talents as a student. But his living conditions had only gotten worse since he’d come to the Medicine King’s Valley and had to support his squandering master! What kind of useless man was he?! How could a doctor treat his patient this way?!

Song Qingshi’s panic grew with every word of his apology. His eyes glistened with unshed tears.

“It’s not that serious,” Yue Wuhuan rushed to explain. “This isn’t hard for me. Your research benefits the entire world. Supporting you is the least I can do.”

“But…” Song Qingshi pulled at him, not knowing what to say.

A soft smile shone in Yue Wuhuan’s eyes. He held Song Qingshi’s hand, then said in a gentle voice, “I like being busy, Zunzhu. I can think about something that isn’t the past. Let me do it. I like doing things for you.”

A beautiful finger glided along Song Qingshi’s palm, drawing circle after circle. It was warm, and Song Qingshi’s heart felt oddly ticklish. He couldn’t have been more moved by Yue Wuhuan’s kindness.

Yue Wuhuan continued playing with his palm. “The budget will get tight for a while. I’ll save up to buy some land for medicinal herbs, stock up on ingredients, and educate a few apothecaries. People are always happy to buy low-level elixirs and medicines from the valley, but I don’t have the connections to do it alone. It would be best if we found an intermediary to communicate with potential customers.”

Song Qingshi knew what really concerned Yue Wuhuan, and he’d have demanded someone accompany him anyway. He was afraid his patient would run into perverts. Well, there was that, and the fact that the immortal

realm also swarmed with murderers and thieves. Only the powerful could afford to do business.

The only person in the Medicine King's Valley who commanded enough respect was Song Qingshi. But had you asked him, a little lamb burdened with paralyzing social anxiety, to talk business with sly, experienced foxes, he might as well die.

Eventually, Song Qingshi hit upon an idea. He plucked a letter from amid his pile of books.

"An Long's coming in a few days. He's the master of the Thousand Poison Sect. They're very well-known in Xilin, and he owns a spirit crystal mine, so he's super rich and has connections. Let's ask him to be our angel investor!"

Song Qingshi's father and older sister were business magnates. He lacked worldly experience, but he had absorbed *some* concepts through osmosis.

Yue Wuhuan glanced at the box of Song Qingshi's letters and noticed that most of them were from An Long. Although they often exchanged academic research, he was now sending nearly three or four letters a month. The Medicine King's Valley often made gifts to the Thousand Poison Sect, and the Thousand Poison Sect always sent more expensive gifts in return.

Something about their relationship unsettled Yue Wuhuan, and his brow knitted. It was time he got to the bottom of things.

Song Qingshi hid nothing from Yue Wuhuan. He was happy to explain his history with An Long in depth.

Recently, the previous host's memories felt more and more like they'd happened to him, and like the two of them shared not just a body, but a soul. The only difference was that the original host had a much colder disposition and hadn't received a moral education, so his methods were extreme. Otherwise, their lifestyles were identical. The original Song Qingshi only cared for research or cultivation, never people, so his memories of An Long weren't clear. Still, most of them matched up.

"We met five hundred years ago. At the time, I hadn't yet reached yuanying, and he was a minor cultivator who'd just established his

foundation. I think he was a little older than you are now. Seventeen or eighteen? He was a rebellious youth."

Yue Wuhuan interrupted him, "Zunzhu, I was sealed before I grew any further, so I only look young. I was an adult when I established my foundation."

"Yes, and once we break the seal you'll start growing again. Don't rush to form a golden core." Song Qingshi remembered his own training. "You'll age slowly after you've established a foundation, and once you develop your core, you'll stay at that age forever. Don't be like me and develop it too soon. Unless you use your body to cultivate, or you reach the fenshen level and recreate a body."

His boyish face disguised the original's bloody path to power. He didn't want to try bodily cultivation just to correct his physical appearance, so he had to accept it.

"I know." Yue Wuhuan looked at him, pleased. He licked his lips. "You're fine the way you are."

Song Qingshi took that for comfort, and continued, "I met An Long while foraging in a secret realm. We discussed medicine, and I thought he was insightful. He knew so much about poisons and venoms, so I often invited him to the valley. He was a real joker and loved to rile me up. After a few years I reached yuanying, and we had this huge argument. I don't know why, but he threw a fit and even cursed at me. It went on for a while, and in the end, he left."

Yue Wuhuan drummed his fingers on the table, deep in thought.

"Two hundred years later, he reached yuanying and realized his mistake. He wrote to apologize, and we've corresponded ever since. We have a good relationship," Song Qingshi concluded. "I think he was just in his rebellious phase."

Yue Wuhuan phrased his question carefully. "Zunzhu, does he like men?"

"Don't worry!" Song Qingshi had anticipated his concern. "An Long may be promiscuous and unserious, but he's totally straight! When we hung out, he teased the girls all the time. He'd flirt with one lady or anger

another. Apparently, he’s gotten into tons of trouble out there, but I’ve never seen him show an interest in men.”

Yue Wuhuan was still a little suspicious.

Song Qingshi patted his chest in reassurance. “Don’t worry. If he lays a finger on you, I’ll break his legs!”

Chapter 19

THE ENTIRE VALLEY prepared for the vaunted An Long's arrival.

Song Qingshi adjusted his robes in front of the mirror, carefully checking over his appearance. When he looked back, he saw Yue Wuhuan wore a plain cloth robe the color of dishwater. He looked no different from the servants. His dreary ensemble did little to conceal his beauty, but it didn't suit him. Bright, dazzling colors flattered him most.

How low had the valley fallen, that the phoenix had to dress like a sparrow? Song Qingshi couldn't help feeling guilty. He decided to conquer his fear and pull in a big investment from the Thousand Poison Sect.

A mail bird cried above him, and the poison mists shrouding the Medicine King's Valley parted to admit their guest.

Suddenly, commotion stirred between the servants guarding the gates. It gradually spread to the entire valley. A few timid servants even ran away in a panic.

Yue Wuhuan gave them a withering look. Their master favored this cruel, cold-blooded beauty enough that the servants stopped mid-flight, the blood draining from their faces.

"What's going on?" Song Qingshi asked.

Yue Wuhuan cast down his eyes and didn't answer.

Song Qingshi quickly understood the source of their fear: A huge white snake slithered its way up the stairs, scenting the air with its forked tongue. The sun sparkled on its silver scales, and its bloodred eyes made it seem like a demon from the depths of hell.

The white snake raised its head and wriggled in Song Qingshi's direction. When it reached him, it rubbed its head affectionately on his feet and coiled its tail around his leg.

Song Qingshi smiled and squatted to pet its head. "Is this Xiaobai? It's been so long. How'd you get so big?"

Song Qingshi's recognition delighted the snake. It poked him with its tongue and nuzzled him harder.

Yue Wuhuan wanted to stop the snake from touching Song Qingshi, but he held back. Someone else had approached them.

"Traitor! I knew it liked you more." A hulking shadow loomed over them. Exasperation filled his deep, booming voice. "You turned down Haolong's[10] companionship back in the secret realm, so it settled for me. But it's never been happy with that. It always wants to return to see you."

"Stop joking!" Song Qingshi chuckled. "The Medicine King's Valley isn't a good place for it. The Thousand Poison Sect makes an ideal habitat."

Five hundred years ago, Haolong was just a young snake. A larger, older animal had injured it in a fight before the original Song Qingshi discovered it. After he nursed it back to health, it just wouldn't leave him alone. As a result, the original Song Qingshi forced An Long to take it instead. Haolong was no thicker than a finger at the time. Under An Long's custody, it had grown huge, and its scales were radiant. Clearly, the rich sect had taken good care of it.

Song Qingshi finished petting the snake, looked up, and was dumbfounded.

The An Long in his memory was a shy but playful young man. The man before him was at least six feet tall with an impressive physique. He wore a tight, black leather vest, and his right arm was completely covered in tattoos of the Five Poisons.[11] The drawings of fierce animals were terrifying yet captivating as they wrapped around white bones. It was hard to look away from the intimidating ink. His cropped hair made his features seem sharper, his brows reached his temples, and his nose was straight as the peak of a mountain. He had a predator's long, thin eyes and kept his narrow lips tightly shut. His very presence emanated danger.

Time was like a chisel. Over five hundred years, it had carved An Long a new body. Song Qingshi searched for traces of the man he'd known in that face.

Ah Long examined him as well before he finally smiled. One sharp canine peeked out from under his lip, and his dangerous aura dissipated in an instant. The young jester had returned. That fang set fire to the heart of every girl in the Medicine King's Valley.

Song Qingshi sighed in relief. Here was the troublemaker he'd expected.

An Long glanced at their surroundings, then bent to whisper. "I thought you were angry with me and you never wanted to see me again."

Song Qingshi carefully went through his memories of that chaotic child. "I wasn't angry."

An Long didn't believe him. He thumped Song Qingshi's shoulder as if to change the subject.

Song Qingshi winced with each blow. Members of the Thousand Poison Sect cultivated obscene strength.

"Oh, yeah. I heard you brought back a…" An Long glanced at the gathered crowd and picked out Yue Wuhuan, then paused for a moment. He didn't know what to call Yue Wuhuan, so he decided randomly. "A buddy. Is this the little guy? He looks so cute and well-behaved, nothing like the rumors."

Yue Wuhuan had heard worse. Without a change in expression, he bowed politely to An Long and held his tongue.

Song Qingshi, however, was astonished.

An Long rubbed his chin and sighed. “How beautiful. Too bad he’s a man.”

He might now lead the Thousand Poison Sect and have reached yuanying level, but he was still an asshole with no filter.

Song Qingshi’s expression went cold, and he dragged An Long to the main hall, as he had a hundred times before. He asked Yue Wuhuan to feed the mice, then started his lecture. He wanted the financial backing of the Thousand Poison Sect, but he had to establish some ground rules, so he quickly went through An Long’s history of tomfoolery, then gave him a list of things he was not allowed to do: He could not tease Yue Wuhuan, make insinuations about him, curse at him, or touch him. He also wasn’t allowed to barge into Yue Wuhuan’s bedroom or drink with him. The list continued until Song Qingshi covered all twenty-six items.

“Heavens above.” An Long was stunned for a long time before recovering. “Is this guy made of glass?”

Song Qingshi rapped on the table, scolding him. “Number twenty-seven: Do not describe him in weird ways.”

“Okay, okay, okay.” An Long, for some reason, was happy to be scolded. He held his hands up in surrender and promised not to speak without thinking. “But what should I call him? What’s his official position in the Medicine King’s Valley?”

Song Qingshi froze. This presented a dilemma.

Yue Wuhuan’s problem was mental, which meant Song Qingshi couldn’t just divulge this information. He needed to protect his patient’s privacy. In the immortal realm, the Medicine King’s secretary bore the same status as a butler—none at all. He should’ve given Yue Wuhuan a proper title.

Song Qingshi stood up. “Hold on, I must go confirm something.”

Yue Wuhuan had finished feeding the mice, but since he expected Song Qingshi had things to discuss with An Long that he wasn’t privy to,

he’d settled in a nearby hallway to read while he waited.

“Ah, Wuhuan!” Song Qingshi said when he found him there. “Do you want to be my disciple?”

Yue Wuhuan stared at him. “Zunzhu, why the sudden request?”

“An Long reminded me. It’s better if you have an official position here. I’ve never taken a disciple before, so you can be my first. That way, it’ll be easier for you to do certain things and see people. But if you don’t want to, never mind. I’ll think of something else.”

“I do, I do! You saved my life, and you’ve taught me so much. I already thought of you as my teacher. I was just too scared to ask.” Yue Wuhuan produced a piece of blackwood carved with his name and offered it for Song Qingshi’s appraisal. “Actually, I made a life plaque in secret, a long time ago. Please accept it, Zunzhu.”

Every disciple needed a life plaque. In the immortal realm, it was hard to know when danger might strike, so sects used their disciples’ heartblood to make a plaque and stored it somewhere safe. If the plaque shattered, it signified the disciple’s death.

Yue Wuhuan continued cautiously. “I added a little array when I made it. If I die of an accident, the plaque will show my body’s location. I hope that…if something happens, you’ll cremate me. I’d like to stay in the valley with you, cleansed and untainted. Is that all right?”

Song Qingshi was incredibly moved. “Don’t worry, I’ll protect you. I won’t let anything like that happen.”

In reply, Yue Wuhuan performed the ceremonial bow.

“Hold on, I have a request.” Song Qingshi stopped him, embarrassed. “Is it okay if you don’t call me ‘Shifu’? That title always makes me think of that guy…”

He hadn’t taken Yue Wuhuan as a disciple until now for a reason. Yue Wuhuan’s previous teacher had seriously exceeded Song Qingshi’s breaking point, to the point of sickening him. He didn’t want Yue Wuhuan to call him the same thing, and he worried the title would traumatize Yue Wuhuan further.

Yue Wuhuan understood his intentions, and agreed with a smile, repeating the bow.

“You can pay respects to your shizu[12] later,” Song Qingshi said.

He then returned to An Long with the plaque. “Okay, Yue Wuhuan’s my head disciple now. Nice title, right?”

An Long didn’t know what to say. He’d seen people take disciples in haste, but this was the quickest yet. In less than an hour, the first disciple of the Medicine King had emerged from the oven.

Was it just because of a casual question? Heavens above, had he done something wrong?

Song Qingshi was pleased to have settled that worry, so he returned to thinking about funding. His sister said the first step to snagging an investor was to make sure they ate well, drank well, and had a good time before being coaxed to sign a contract. Thus Song Qingshi led An Long to his lab. He explained his methods for cultivating bacteria, and invited An Long to conduct an experiment with him.

He and the original Song Qingshi demonstrated their appreciation for their friends the same way. It was a bit peculiar, but very sincere.

An Long gazed at him in surprise and delight from the moment they entered the lab, and his eyes searched Song Qingshi’s as though he wanted to confirm something. Honestly, it was a bit awkward.

“Is there something on my face?” Song Qingshi said.

“Qingshi. You really forgive me?” An Long asked carefully.

Everyone did stupid things during their rebellious years. What could be serious enough to warrant holding a grudge? Besides, he couldn’t even remember most grievances.

“I forgave you long ago,” Song Qingshi said, laughing magnanimously. “I don’t even remember half the things we fought about.”

An Long’s eyes watered. He stared in disbelief. “You seriously forgot?”

“I hate lying.”

“Right. Right! You never lie.” An Long swept him up into a hug and buried his face in Song Qingshi’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

An Long had dropped his pretenses, laying his warm heart open. He was beside himself with happiness.

Song Qingshi wanted to push him away, but then a warm wetness started to spread over his shoulder. After considering it for a moment, he decided he couldn’t move now.

“You have no idea how much I regretted it.” An Long’s voice was a little hoarse. “I’m so happy to see you again.”

Chapter 20

SONG QINGSHI FELT a little uneasy. He suspected he had forgotten something important.

Regardless, An Long was assigned to stay in the Tranquil Mind Courtyard. The servants allocated to him had been carefully selected for their experience and maturity. An Long liked to drink, and once before he had broken into Song Qingshi's collection of expensive wines. Song Qingshi preempted a second incident by sending someone to purchase a batch of fine wines to be sent to An Long's courtyard.

Song Qingshi had also applied security arrays to the doors, windows, and roof, in case An Long got smashed and tried to climb into his room and drag him on a midnight excursion to catch cicadas or crickets.

Everything had been taken care of, so what had he forgotten?

Song Qingshi let down his hair and put on his pajamas. He lay sleepless deep into the night, until he remembered *exactly* what the problem was.

He leaped out of bed, put on his shoes in a state of panic, threw his robe over his shoulders, and ran to An Long's yard in single-minded terror.

Haolong liked to eat mice!

Song Qingshi fumbled in the dark. Even from outside, he could smell the stench of alcohol emanating from An Long's room. His lights were off, and it seemed he'd gone to sleep.

Song Qingshi pulled his robe tighter around himself. He raised a hand to knock, and after a long hesitation, rapped gently on the door.

The door creaked open.

The fog of alcohol hit him. A pair of strong, sturdy arms shot out from the darkness and coiled around his waist.

"Baby, you're finally here."

Song Qingshi's vision spun. Before he knew what was happening, he landed in a heap on the bed.

His robe, which he never put on properly, pooled open around him. An Long captured Song Qingshi's hands, and his warm, wet breath filled the space between them.

"Don't leave tonight," An Long pleaded.

Song Qingshi couldn't move. Body cultivators were brutes, shockingly strong, and there was no way he could muster the force to throw off his assailant.

Protective spiritual fire flared inside him, hot as molten metal. An Long yelped in pain and let go. He tumbled off the bed in a state of undress. Song Qingshi used his fire to light a candle, then glared at the man on the floor.

"Are you sober now?"

An Long was shocked. "Why is it you?"

"Who did you think it was?" Song Qingshi recalled the flame and tied his robe, properly this time. He didn't look happy.

"I thought…" An Long grimaced and cradled his injured hand. "I thought it was that Huang Ling girl throwing herself at me."

Huang Ling? Song Qingshi thought about it, and realized he did have an inkling of who this girl might be. She'd arrived at the Medicine King's Valley a few years prior and was still considered new. She kept the grounds around the Tranquil Mind Courtyard clean. Most of the servants were men, and only thirty to forty were women—older, at that—so Huang Ling was well-liked. She was young, outgoing, and quite pretty. Song Qingshi had run into her once and explained something she was confused about. After Yue Wuhuan took charge of the internal matters of the valley, he hadn't seen her again.

An Long saw his hesitation and took it as an opportunity.

"You're always saying I get into trouble when I drink. Now you're breaking down my door, totally sober? With your hair loose and your robe like that? Look in the mirror. You can't blame me for getting the wrong idea. Be happy I hadn't lit any candles, or I'd have died of a heart attack."

Song Qingshi couldn’t help but look back at the mirror. A white robe, long hair…

All right, fine, he looked like a female ghost.

Although he was a little uncomfortable, they were both men, and it was an honest mistake. He wasn’t a beauty like Yue Wuhuan, and what advantage could An Long take? There was no point to prolonging the matter.

“Never mind.” Song Qingshi generously pivoted to another topic. “When did you start flirting with my servant?”

“Don’t get me wrong.” An Long sat down on the edge of the bed. He raised a hand and swore earnestly, “She flirted with me first. If you don’t believe me, go ask.”

His robes puddled around him, and he’d tied his pants so haphazardly they’d fall from his hips with the slightest movement. He affected a relaxed pose, as though he didn’t care that his perfect triangular torso and eight-pack were on display. Girls couldn’t resist his bad boy charm.

Knowing An Long’s illustrious history, Song Qingshi once again believed him.

“Anyway, what did you need me for this late at night?” An Long asked with a smirk.

“I didn’t come here for you.” Song Qingshi searched the room, remembering the matter at hand. “Where’s Xiaobai?”

Haolong descended from the rafters and looked up at him affectionately.

Seizing it with one hand, Song Qingshi issued a stern warning to the snake: Do *not* eat mice in the Medicine King’s Valley.

Haolong was intelligent enough to bob its head in understanding. Song Qingshi knew it wouldn’t trouble him half as much as An Long could, so he allowed himself to relax. He promised to bring Haolong lots of delicious treats as recompense and even play with it.

An Long looked out the door while they held their conversation, a hint of a smile hanging on his lips. He’d noticed a while ago that Yue Wuhuan was in the yard some distance away. His position allowed him to

see everything that had occurred in the room, but he'd assumed an air of nonchalance, as though he didn't care about what he'd witnessed. How interesting.

When Yue Wuhuan noticed An Long was watching him, he bowed hurriedly. He lowered his head in embarrassment, pretending he hadn't seen anything. Every reaction was natural. He acted like a servant who was well aware of his own position: careful, well-behaved, reserved.

An Long didn't buy it for a second. Everyone in Xilin knew the colorful creatures were the most poisonous.

With Haolong thoroughly educated, Song Qingshi readied himself to leave.

"Your disciple's having a laugh outside." An Long gestured at the courtyard.

"It's *your* fault." Song Qingshi blushed, thinking that An Long had spoiled the mature, steady image he'd cultivated for Yue Wuhuan. He hustled away, leading his disciple out of the Tranquil Mind Courtyard.

An Long watched them disappear into the dark. He opened another jar of wine and drank it in one long gulp.

The more he drank, the more awake he felt. He prodded the burn on his hand.

"Ha. And here I thought I was in for a good time."

"I'm not usually like this," Song Qingshi explained to Yue Wuhuan as he walked. "That guy's like an Alaskan malamute. Don't take him seriously, okay?"

"An Alaskan what?"

Song Qingshi's anger hadn't fully dissipated. "Alaskan malamute! A dog!"

His sister had one. It was a professional at ruining the house, and could not be trained. That thing infuriated him. He'd walked it only once, and he'd been too weak to keep it from dragging him into a shallow river.

Good thing he didn’t drown. After they returned home, he still had to pacify it with food and treats.

Yue Wuhuan didn’t understand what Song Qingshi meant, but he didn’t want to pry. “Well, the servants say Huang Ling, who works at the Tranquil Mind Courtyard, has indeed been breaking the rules. She intends to seduce the master of the Thousand Poison Sect. Zunzhu, do you think we should send her to the village?”

Song Qingshi considered it. “Go ahead.”

There was no harm in young girls having such thoughts, but considering their many important resources, the Medicine King’s Valley couldn’t keep staff with ulterior motives. Besides, An Long was a huge playboy. He’d dumped countless female cultivators and had once claimed he was hiding in the valley. Female cultivators sobbed and cried outside the gates, demanding that he show his face. Some even raised their fists! It was quite a scene. If he hadn’t needed to monitor an elixir he was making, the original Song Qingshi would’ve demanded An Long settle the matter himself.

Either way, Huang Ling couldn’t handle a fuckboy like An Long. It was better if she stayed away.

Yue Wuhuan made a noise of agreement before subtly covering his nose.

“What’s wrong?” Song Qingshi asked, the movement not escaping his notice.

“Zunzhu, the alcohol smell on you is a little…strong.”

Song Qingshi sniffed his sleeve. It did indeed smell faintly of alcohol. His stomach churned, and he dashed for the bath behind his bedroom.

“Wuhuan, grab me a new set of pajamas. I’ll go bathe.”

“All right,” Yue Wuhuan said, beaming. “Get good and clean.”

Song Qingshi cast a few cleaning spells on himself, then leaped into his large hot spring and swam a few laps. Then he lay against the edge, prodding the nonexistent contours of his pale, soft, skinny stomach.

Thinking about An Long’s eight-pack and iliac furrows, and the subtle lines of Yue Wuhuan’s abs, he felt a little self-conscious.

He finally had a healthy body. Shouldn’t he exercise and get a little manlier?

Song Qingshi thought about it for a long time.

Yue Wuhuan sat on the steps outside, reading while he fiddled with his scalpel.

Even by candlelight, his eyes reflected nothing. They were dark as an endless abyss. That filthy bug man smelled so disgusting he could’ve thrown up. How could he not be angry?

Countless painful lessons had taught him that the angrier he was, the more he needed to be calm—the more nauseous he felt, the more natural he needed to act. No one could see his will falter. At times like this, he laughed when he wanted to weep, grinned when it hurt, and turned his cries of pain to pleasure. He had more than enough practice allowing disgusting men to delight in his body.

All the while, he waited patiently in the shadows until the exact moment he could snap his venomous fangs shut.

Chapter 21

SONG QINGSHI WOKE EARLY and brought Yue Wuhuan to the ancestral hall to bow to the memory of Song Qingshi's teacher.

For other sects, the ancestral hall was important, but the valley's hall was in a state of disrepair, obscured by a thicket of trees and a medicinal garden. It wasn't in much better shape than the servants' quarters. Yue Wuhuan had always thought it was an abandoned building and paid it no mind.

Song Qingshi pushed open the doors that had been sealed with a talisman.

A blanket of dust covered the interior. Other than a simple table, chairs, and an altar, the only thing inside was an old scroll.

"We don't need to keep it locked. There isn't anything valuable in here," said Song Qingshi, somewhat embarrassed. "I haven't been here in years. Hold on, let me clean it up a bit." He rolled up his sleeves and summoned a breeze to sweep the dust away. He dashed cleaning spells here and there before setting the altar with incense, flowers, and fresh fruits. After putting down a few threadbare cushions, he dusted his hands off.

"All right," he said, sounding pleased.

Yue Wuhuan clutched the incense to his chest. He'd never seen such an astonishingly casual sect.

Song Qingshi unrolled the scroll and hung it above the altar. There were no figures or dedications painted on the scroll, only a sea of clouds on the distant horizon, pierced by a brilliant ray of light.

"I inherited my master's knowledge unexpectedly, while I was in a secret realm. They only left their surname, Song. I didn't have a last name at the time, so I took theirs out of respect."

Murder was common in the immortal realm. Orphans abounded; the original Song Qingshi had been one. Because he was born with two kinds of spiritual fire and was inclined toward medicine and poisons, he'd

inherited the Medicine King's knowledge and created the Medicine King's Valley. Ever since, he'd stayed in his residence, taken in patients, created elixirs and poisons, and occasionally visited secret realms for rare, precious herbs. He'd gathered his current reputation over the centuries.

"In the immortal realm, passing on knowledge means imparting it directly into the recipient's mind. This scroll is the only physical thing my teacher left behind. I suspect it has special meaning, so I've worshipped it all this time. I don't actually know what it depicts. It might be scenery?" Song Qingshi didn't feel confident guessing and quickly glossed over it. "In any case, I've made copies of the sect's secrets and knowledge. They're in the library. You can read them at your leisure."

Song Qingshi thought his explanation was quite thorough, and he motioned for Yue Wuhuan to light the incense.

Yue Wuhuan did so, but as he was about to kneel, the incense went out.

He lit it once more, then knelt again. The incense went out once more.

Yue Wuhuan glanced at Song Qingshi. "Does…Shizu not want to take me in?"

"No way, you're so smart! Xianshi[13] would be more than happy to have you." Song Qingshi made a dismissive gesture, then reconsidered. "Actually, I'm not sure I've ever knelt. Usually I come in, clean, light incense, and leave, if I even remember to do that. Maybe Xianshi doesn't want you to kneel? Try just lighting the incense."

Yue Wuhuan relit the incense and arranged it in the burner. He remained upright, still skeptical, and performed a huge bow.

The incense kept burning.

"Isn't this too disrespectful?"

"Xianshi doesn't like that kind of thing. He likes…" Song Qingshi thought back to his inheritance. Whoever imparted the knowledge to him had done so without attribution. There was, however, an intriguing phrase, which seemed to be his motto: *"Question."*

Question power. Question knowledge. Question everything and anything.

Song Qingshi explained this all with a serious look on his face.

“Xianshi doesn’t want us to blindly respect him, but to respect the knowledge and fully understand his ideas. He wants us to study hard and research purposefully. Just because he’s our shizu doesn’t mean we shouldn’t question what he left behind. He was incredible, but he could still make mistakes. We should constantly strive to find the right answer among our mistakes.”

“The right answer?” Yue Wuhuan repeated.

“Yes! I’ve already disproven a lot of what Xianshi taught me through research and corrected the record.”

His ideals contravened all notions of filial respect that the immortal realm took so seriously. Yue Wuhuan felt so surprised he didn’t know what to say.

“Perhaps this is what the Medicine King’s Valley was built on,” said Song Qingshi. “If I die, I want to follow in Xianshi’s footsteps. I don’t want my disciples to worship me, I don’t want to leave behind any portraits, and I don’t want people to respect my name. That’s a waste of time. I’d rather they finish what I couldn’t, correct my mistakes, pursue new and interesting ideas…”

Before Song Qingshi could finish, Yue Wuhuan squeezed his shoulder sharply. He glowered and gnashed his teeth, face dark as a storm cloud. “Don’t invite bad luck!”

“Heh, don’t worry! I’m talking about when my time is up,” Song Qingshi reassured him with a smile.

People in the medical field did not fear talking about their deaths. He didn’t think this topic was anything unusual.

“No! You’re not allowed to talk about it!” Yue Wuhuan sounded a little panicked and harsh.

His anger seemed genuine, so for the sake of his mental health, Song Qingshi shut his mouth obediently.

The two of them were silent for a while. Yue Wuhuan knew he should apologize, but he couldn’t bring himself to. In the end, their reticence made for mutual agreement.

The ceremony was complete.

Song Qingshi loved sweets, especially popsicles, but Yue Wuhuan was finicky and disdained outside food as too mediocre or too unclean for Song Qingshi. The Medicine King’s Valley lacked a good chef, so when Yue Wuhuan had free time, he studied recipes for sweets to spoil his teacher. Every day, Song Qingshi enjoyed the feast of confectioneries prepared by Yue Wuhuan. All of them were delicious!

After An Long found out about Song Qingshi’s personal pâtissier, it was like he’d downloaded a new game mode: capture the sweets. He even tried to coax Yue Wuhuan into making a treat for him too.

Song Qingshi blew up immediately. “Is my head disciple a servant?”

An Long didn’t care. That hungry dog wouldn’t stop barking until Yue Wuhuan made him something.

“He’s busy. Forget it.” Song Qingshi put his book down and rolled up his sleeves. “I’ll do it.”

An Long’s eyes lit up.

Song Qingshi might have had a sweet tooth, but he had little appetite otherwise. He ate or he didn’t. Both were fine. In his original world, he was a spoiled brat whose food and clothes appeared without his having to ask. This world’s Song Qingshi preferred to fast rather than cook, so he’d never crossed the threshold of a kitchen in either life. He knew the use of countless medicinal herbs, but not salt, oil, soy sauce, or vinegar…

He stood in the kitchen, completely adrift. He’d figured out how the kitchen tools worked but hadn’t found any recipes. He didn’t know how to start a wood fire either, so he used his own spiritual flame. He would make sweets the way he formulated his elixirs.

After a titanic struggle, he produced a plate of round rice cakes that could have doubled as charcoal briquettes, uniform in size, shape, and color. They looked identical down to the ember, enough to please any perfectionist.

“Here. Sticky rice cakes.” Song Qingshi faced his failures head-on, displaying his creation because it was proof he’d done his best. “It’s probably really bad. Let’s toss it, and I’ll tell the chef to make some. Do what you want, within limit—just don’t trouble Wuhuan.”

An Long grinned at the rice cakes, then tossed one into his mouth.

Song Qingshi didn’t react in time to stop the malamute from eating what he shouldn’t. He was a bit worried he’d get diarrhea.

An Long chewed on it thoughtfully for a while. “You know, it looks bad, but it tastes all right.”

Then, he enthusiastically threw several more into his mouth. Only one remained uneaten.

Song Qingshi stared with his mouth agape. After his rice cakes were done, he hadn’t even dared have a taste. Were they really not bad?

Mustering his courage, he took the last rice cake and placed it on his tongue. He chewed a bit.

An explosion of inexplicable flavors flooded his taste buds. It exceeded the limits of even his sweet tooth, and left a weird aftertaste of all kinds of spices and flavorings. There was even a strange fishy taste that made everything taste worse than the bitterest medicine. It was not *bad*. It was repulsive.

Song Qingshi was so disgusted that tears streamed down his cheeks. He spat out the rice cake and pointed an accusatory finger at An Long. He didn't even know what to say!

An Long slapped the table, howling with laughter. He laughed so hard that he doubled over.

He was the kind of person to tease Song Qingshi even if it meant harming himself. And he had a good grasp of where the original Song Qingshi's breaking point was, since he had avoided getting murdered so far. Seeing that Song Qingshi was about to explode, An Long wiped his tears, put on a straight face, and said: "I'll never ask Yue Wuhuan for food again."

Song Qingshi's anger dissipated.

"This was your first time cooking. What a precious moment! I had to give it a taste."

Now Song Qingshi felt a little embarrassed.

"Hey, by the way, want to see this new bug I made?" An Long asked. "It's very cute."

Forget the unimportant rice cakes! Song Qingshi dragged An Long off to the lab.

On the way, An Long was all smiles. "Why are you so worried about Yue Wuhuan anyway? Is he sick or something?"

Song Qingshi glanced at him cautiously, unwilling to answer such a private question. "Don't ask random things."

"How interesting," An Long mused.

The more meddling Song Qingshi prevented, the more meddling An Long would do. It was just so much fun for him.

Yue Wuhuan finished sword practice and prepared to bathe and change. As he passed a hallway, a balled-up piece of paper bounced off the back of his head and rolled onto the ground.

It enclosed…something.

He couldn't disturb Song Qingshi, who was at that moment busy with medical experiments. He took the paper in hand, as the other party intended, and smoothed it out.

An alarming double-headed centipede scuttled out. Its countless legs twitched, and both its mouths disgorged a sticky fluid. It leaped onto Yue Wuhuan, brandishing its various appendages.

After a brief pause, Yue Wuhuan grabbed the centipede with the paper and crumpled it back up.

"An-xianzun. Don't play childish pranks," he snapped, tossing the wad of paper aside.

"What, now that Qingshi isn't here, you can't be bothered to act delicate?" An Long stepped from behind a screen. He waved a hand, and the centipede scurried out of the paper into his palm. "This little guy isn't very venomous. I keep him for the scare factor. Girls scream and tremble when they see it. It's hilarious. You aren't even a little afraid? I'm kind of disappointed."

"I can scream if that's what you want," Yue Wuhuan said, exasperated.

"No thanks. I don't like fake performances." With a wave of An Long's hand, the centipede disappeared. He sauntered closer, then looked Yue Wuhuan up and down. "I never thought I'd meet a guy prettier than Lady Wan at Bright Moon Pavilion. Even though I know you're a man, I'm not grossed out."

He had drawn a cruel analogy, with Bright Moon Pavilion being a famous brothel in the immortal realm and Lady Wan one of its famous occupants.

But Yue Wuhuan just smiled. "I've long since heard that An-xianzun's romantic conquests litter the world, and that you never lack for

companions. Be they cultivators or otherwise, women go to war for you, sometimes even literally. I am honored beyond belief by your praise."

"Very funny, Wuhuan-gongzi." An Long chuckled wryly at Yue Wuhuan's sarcasm. "The number of my romantic liaisons can't beat the number of guests you've entertained. I knew this guy called Yu Something, a real righteous hero, who never forgot you. He got wasted after he found out you'd come to the Medicine King's Valley and he'd never have the chance to see you again. You know, he had a lot to say."

Yu Qing had smeared Song Qingshi's reputation in his drunken stupor, so An Long had killed him and gifted his corpse to the valley.

Yue Wuhuan, soaked with sweat from his sword practice, pretended he couldn't understand. "I don't really think about dead people."

An Long snorted. "Stone cold, beauty."

"Sure. Prostitutes and opera performers are meant to be heartless." Yue Wuhuan tucked a strand of damp hair behind his ear and leaned against the spirit screen. He raised his eyes in challenge. "An-xianzun, don't you think the living are the interesting ones?"

An Long drew close and slammed his forearm, crawling with tattoos of venomous creatures, against the wall by Yue Wuhuan's ear. Shedding his mask, An Long leaned down, smirked, and revealed one sharp fang. "*You're* interesting, with all that pretense you put up. I'd like to see what's inside your beautiful shell. Why don't you show me?"

"An-xianzun's interested in the real me?" Yue Wuhuan flashed a smile.

"Very." An Long gripped Yue Wuhuan's chin and forced him to look him in the eye. He studied Yue Wuhuan's face from inches away.

Yue Wuhuan stared at An Long for a while—until his eyes looked past him. "Oh, Zunzhu finished his experiments earlier than anticipated."

An Long released Yue Wuhuan. After a moment of panic, he remembered he'd blocked Song Qingshi's spiritual senses from detecting him. He had nothing to fear.

Yue Wuhuan covered his smile.

“You lied to me?!” An Long was furious. He wanted to sink his claws into Yue Wuhuan.

Suddenly, a trail of spirit fire lit up beneath his feet. An Long leaped wide of the danger, but the fire’s advance forced him back by several yards.

Song Qingshi appeared behind him, ready to crush the Alaskan malamute that dared bully his little angel while he wasn’t looking. Good thing Yue Wuhuan had reminded him to spiritually monitor An Long once in a while. Otherwise, the damned dog might chew the Medicine King’s Valley to pieces!

Although yuanying cultivators could avoid detection by others’ spiritual senses, back in the lab, Song Qingshi had realized he couldn’t sense An Long’s presence. That spelled danger; An Long would only hide if he intended to cause trouble. Song Qingshi had confirmed Yue Wuhuan’s location and hurried over.

An Long pointed at Yue Wuhuan. “You. You! *You!*”

“I didn’t lie,” Yue Wuhuan said in a small voice.

“Was he bullying you?” Song Qingshi rushed to Yue Wuhuan’s side and examined him for injuries.

He didn’t need to see what happened to know who was at fault. A fierce, macho Alaskan malamute versus a poor, pitiful angel. A brittle and traumatized patient versus a muscle-bound bad boy. He knew who would win in a fight. An Long could kill Yue Wuhuan a hundred times over with his little finger. Song Qingshi needed to protect his precious angel, even if they lost the investment!

Yes, Song Qingshi was biased. No, he would not apologize.

An Long glowered at Yue Wuhuan in a way that promised retribution.

“No, no, An-xianzun is a lovely man,” Yue Wuhuan cooed. “We were just joking around.”

Song Qingshi brandished his spiritual fire at An Long, like he might turn it poisonous at any second.

An Long dazzled him with an innocent smile. “I wouldn’t dare! We just had a chat, some great laughs, you know.”

“Yes,” Yue Wuhuan said. “Zunzhu, I hardly ever leave the valley, so An-xianzun caught me up with stories of the outside world. I’m delighted.”

An Long wrapped an arm around Wuhuan’s shoulder and thumped his own chest. “I just met him, but it’s like I’ve known him for years.”

“An-xianzun really wasn’t bullying me.”

“Really?” Song Qingshi asked, only half believing. He let the fire dim.

“Yes.” Both men nodded.

Song Qingshi scratched his head. When he saw An Long corner Yue Wuhuan with a domineering stance, he was already fiery with anger. He hadn’t paid attention to what they were doing. Had he really misunderstood?

“You’re busy, so let’s have fun again next time,” An Long said to Yue Wuhuan—a thinly veiled threat. Then he dragged Song Qingshi away.

“Come on. I want to see if there are any results from the petri dish we studied yesterday. Don’t get so mad at me! I’d never bully your cute little disciple that’s made of glass.”

“Rule twenty-seven.”

“All right, all right. I’ll stop. Have some wine with me.”

“No.”

Yue Wuhuan bowed at their retreating backs.

The Xilin Poison King had always stood at the top of the food chain. He’d never needed to calculate or scheme in pursuit of his goals. He could achieve them through brute force—so he’d never learned to be subtle.

He knew Yue Wuhuan’s lurid history and suspected him of acting on behalf of an unseen mastermind with designs on the valley or harboring some other secret ambition. An Long might even have uncovered Yue Wuhuan’s feelings for Song Qingshi.

But An Long also worried that if he made unfounded accusations, Song Qingshi would cut ties with him. He couldn’t conduct his investigation openly, so he had manufactured an excuse to get closer and

sniff out Yue Wuhuan’s true intentions. Once An Long had those, he could crush him.

This was not so difficult to take care of. If the Xilin Poison King wanted to see inside Yue Wuhuan’s beautiful shell, he’d just have to show it to him.

An Long better hope he could handle it.

Chapter 22

AN LONG CLUNG to Song Qingshi the whole night, desperate for his thoughts on venomous insects and medical theory. During that period, An Long angered Song Qingshi five times, got scolded five times, then soothed him five more times.

Usually, if anyone scolded An Long, he'd rip their head off, so it was unusual that he just accepted it from Song Qingshi. The thing was, every time Song Qingshi got mad, he inflated his cheeks like a pufferfish and struggled for words. Whatever he settled on, it never seemed to have any effect. He only managed to mutter "shameless," "annoying," and "asshole."

Whenever this happened, An Long couldn't be happier.

He'd always known that the Medicine King *seemed* peculiar and cold, but he actually had a good temper. As long as An Long stayed on the right side of Song Qingshi's boundaries, no matter how angry he got, An Long was not afraid. He had brought antidotes for every sort of poison, and the Medicine King's Valley was full of cures anyway. He wouldn't die, no matter what he did. If he was injured, it would be the perfect excuse for him to stay and enjoy Song Qingshi's medical skills and bedside manner. Nothing satisfied him more.

Finally, Song Qingshi had reached the maximum daily dose of Alaskan malamute. He felt so drained he couldn't even spare the energy to read. He headed straight to bed.

An Long hummed a happy tune as he journeyed to the Tranquil Mind Courtyard, ready to continue drinking.

Some subtle strangeness in the yard triggered his spiritual senses, and he realized all the servants were gone. He swept his room and detected a solitary presence—one he recognized.

"Ha, how brave, coming to find me all on his own," An Long murmured.

He had his doubts about who Yue Wuhuan was, but he still didn't really take the little cultivator who was only at the qi-gathering stage

seriously either. He whistled and threw open the doors to his rooms.

“Imagine seeing you here! Let me guess. You want to throw yourself at my feet because you fell for my handsome charms, right?”

Yue Wuhuan lolled in a beam of moonlight on the daybed by the window. The smooth, dark strands of his unbound hair spilled over the seat, and his pretty, round toes peeked from under his snug robes. He posed invitingly, jiggling his feet, and the pair of clogs he wore swung up and down, up and down.

He looked up and smiled at the sound of the door.

The bright mole under his dignified phoenix eyes had an irresistible allure. An Long, stunned at the sight, couldn’t help but let his gaze linger.

Yue Wuhuan sat up slowly, letting the moonlight wash over his perfect face. His movements were as pure as an immortal, but his voice hinted at sin. “Xianzun, didn’t you want to see my true self? I wouldn’t dare disobey an order, so I came to let you get a good look. I won’t hide anything.”

“What are you doing?” An Long’s throat felt tight. Afraid that someone would get the wrong idea, he shut the door.

Yue Wuhuan’s tongue flickered over his red, curved lips as he smiled mockingly. He stood and untied the jade belt at his waist with a flick of his long, nimble fingers. His plain green robe slid to the floor without a sound, revealing the red ice-silk inner robe. The fabric glistened and flowed like water as it licked the inviting contours of his body. The thin gold rope looped around his waist would fall open at a single touch.

Without the pure outer robe, nothing stood between them and the true face of desire.

Yue Wuhuan wound his way toward An Long. With every step, the ice-silk robe slipped down his shoulders. The fabric offered a glimpse of collarbone that drew the eye further down. As he advanced, the slit in his robe parted around one long, perfect leg, then the other.

“Aren’t you waiting for me to throw myself at you?” Yue Wuhuan purred.

An Long's hair stood on end. "D-don't come closer," he said in a rush. "I don't like men like you! I-I like *women*!"

"If you've never tasted a man, how can you know for sure?" Yue Wuhuan pressed closer. His finger traced a path over An Long's chest, then he let it slide downward. He wore an expression of open want, and more audacious words kept tumbling out of his mouth.

"Men know best how to please men. Xianzun is so experienced in these matters, he must think he's seen everything. That's all the more reason to try it out. I know so many tricks, I'm sure I'll show you a good time."

An Long didn't know how to refute Yue Wuhuan as his blush crawled all the way up to his ears. He could only retreat until he fell into the wooden armchair behind him.

Yue Wuhuan's eyes swept across An Long's prone body. Then he smiled and licked his lips. "I've heard about the Xilin Poison King's legendary strength. I've wanted to see it for so long. Now that I've laid eyes on you, they weren't lying…"

His eyes, voice, fingers, and body gave off sparks; their fire could set leagues of prairie ablaze. He was in full control of the tempo, like a siren reeling prey into the depths of desire.

An Long had met plenty of sex workers. Some fanned the flames, some played dumb, and some were spicy and bold. He'd seen them all and had formed an image of Yue Wuhuan through intel and illustrations. He was just an enticer with a beautiful face and some flirtation skills. An Long had never imagined that the monster raised for twisted pleasure by Phoenix Mountain would blossom this fearsomely. He took pride in his self-control. Yue Wuhuan had almost done it in.

It didn't matter if An Long liked men or women or that his heart belonged to someone else. Logic and reasoning failed him. He struggled like a moth caught in a web of temptation.

Yue Wuhuan slowly sat down on the side table and guided An Long's stiff hand toward his last line of defense: that thin, golden rope.

"Xianzun, you have to carefully inspect Wuhuan's true self. Don't miss an inch."

Finally, An Long slapped two brain cells together, shook off Yue Wuhuan's hand, and smacked it down onto the table. A few highly venomous bugs crawled out of his sleeve.

"You're asking for death!" An Long growled.

"All right." When Yue Wuhuan heard the word "death," his eyes flashed with desire. Looming over the fallen An Long, he commanded, "Go on! *Kill me!*"

The last thread leashing An Long's will snapped. In a rush, he bundled the demon up in his discarded robe and tossed him out the door.

It was only then he realized his ears were burning.

Outside, Yue Wuhuan snorted and brushed himself off. He rearranged his clothes, the desire evaporating from his eyes. He knocked once on the door and waited a long time for a response.

It didn't come.

"Don't get angry, Xianzun," Yue Wuhuan murmured. "I was just joking with you."

"Fuck off!" An Long roared behind the door. "Can't you act more like a real man?!"

Yue Wuhuan paused before snickering. A *man*?

Had everything gone as it should, he would've grown into a handsome, towering warrior like his father and brother before him.

As a child, he had imagined a beautiful future. He'd become a powerful swordsman like Mo Yuan, devoted to his cultivation. He would meet a cute friend with a soft temper, someone who was slow to act but earnest. Someone who looked alluring when lost in concentration. Yue Wuhuan would do everything in his power to be good to him, never leave his side, play him sweet songs, impress him with sword skills, make him laugh… One day, they'd set out together to do good.

Now, those dreams were impossible.

He was stuck as a soft, weak teenager, resigned to a body that couldn't grow. He'd lost any right to call someone his own and had learned

to keep his head down. Time and time again, they stripped him of his masculine dignity—until he accepted his fate as a plaything.

How was he supposed to be a man? Anyone he cared about would be the butt of every joke, just like him! They'd met too late. A bird with broken wings could never fly again. The only thing he could do for his friend was to spare him the disgrace.

Yue Wuhuan envied An Long, who could follow his whims without fear of the consequences, like saying whatever he wanted in front of his beloved friends. Yue Wuhuan, on the other hand, had to take every step carefully and think before he spoke. He couldn't make a single mistake.

He'd promised not to kill himself, so he couldn't just die. This life, at the very least, had to be useful to the person that mattered most. He couldn't let anything foul touch such pure white.

Yue Wuhuan suppressed a shudder and walked alone into the dark.

An Long opened up a jar of wine and took a few fierce gulps before finally calming down.

He'd almost killed that shameless demon—but that would cross a line. Song Qingshi would never forgive him, and they'd never speak to each other again.

It wasn't worth it for something so stupid!

He thought about exposing Yue Wuhuan's sordid ways, but his erotic notoriety preceded him. Song Qingshi had to know; he'd ransomed the demon from Golden Phoenix Mountain himself. Plus, An Long's own reputation as a flirt didn't help his case. People would assume he was the one pressuring Yue Wuhuan. It was hard to believe that a poor, weak cultivator would dare tease a yuanying cultivator with An Long's history and strength. He refused to suffer that embarrassment! How could he explain himself?!

The head disciple of the Medicine King's Valley lusted after my body and tried to tempt me? He threw himself at me? I was a gentleman and turned him down?

Song Qingshi would burn him to a crisp with poisonous fire, and the world would mock his manliness. An Long couldn’t help but spit curses as he thought it over. There was nothing he could do. He took a few more gulps of wine to alleviate his frustration. Suddenly, he arrived at an epiphany.

Why was he beating himself up over this?

With his past, Yue Wuhuan would never be a match for Song Qingshi. From what An Long had found out so far, Yue Wuhuan had done nothing to betray the Medicine King’s Valley, nor had he contacted any outsiders. His current position as a disciple was the best thing that could possibly happen to him.

Song Qingshi experienced no desire and loved medicine above all else. He would never fall for Yue Wuhuan’s tricks. Besides, he had a compulsion for cleanliness. While he didn’t dictate how others lived their lives, he’d never touch anything obscene.

Song Qingshi hadn’t wanted to admit it, but judging by his reaction, Yue Wuhuan was his patient.

Perhaps that was his illness? Thirst for really gorgeous guys?

If An Long got any closer, that demon might start to get ideas about him. What if Yue Wuhuan latched on and wouldn’t let go?

With that scary thought, An Long shuddered. The further he got from that guy, the better!

As Yue Wuhuan hastened through the dark garden path, he adjusted his clothes. In ten steps he’d tied his robes properly and pinned up his hair without a strand out of place. By the time he left the Tranquil Mind Courtyard, he’d shrugged off any signs of debauchery and resumed his chilly, forbidding demeanor.

The change helped him regain some semblance of calm.

He *knew* the Xilin Poison King harbored dirty thoughts. He also knew that An Long was hostile toward him and wanted to be rid of him because he was suspicious. But Yue Wuhuan didn’t have the upper hand. If he didn’t make the first move, his feelings might be exposed. An Long was

a fierce wolf clad in the guise of a dog. He would maul Yue Wuhuan beyond hope of recovery.

Yue Wuhuan had no choice but to act. No matter how unpleasant, it was worth it.

This was the result he'd orchestrated. From now on, the Xilin Poison King would no longer suspect him quite as much. Since he was more harmless than An Long had expected, there would be no reason to get close to him.

Of course, Yue Wuhuan would benefit even more if the Poison King really took him or killed him out of anger. So what if he died? His body disgusted him. If his death revealed An Long's dark side, turning Song Qingshi against him, the malamute would be banished from the Medicine King's Valley forever. That would be the best result.

Since An Long wanted to test Yue Wuhuan's mettle, he'd reciprocate. After all, he'd already learned two interesting facts this evening:

First, An Long had his own ulterior motives regarding Song Qingshi. Second, An Long was probably a virgin.

If that was the case, Yue Wuhuan would have to look deeper into many of the rumors about the Poison King.

Chapter 23

AN LONG TOSSED AND TURNED through the night. All he saw in his dreams was that demon's face, yet he couldn't strike or curse at it—a true test of his self-control.

He woke with a start. It was the first time in his life he'd cowered over something like this.

He spat out a few curses, then sought out his little cutie to soothe his wounded pride. But when he reached the lab, he found Yue Wuhuan reporting to Song Qingshi. He tried to slip away without being noticed, but Yue Wuhuan aimed his charming smile at him.

An Long escaped over the wall, lest he give in to temptation and sic his bugs on the demon.

Song Qingshi cocked his head. "Why did An Long run off? I thought he wanted to be friends with you."

Yue Wuhuan smiled. "No clue."

After retreating, An Long simmered in silence. He *would* find a way to exact revenge. How could he be defeated by a little qi-gathering cultivator? He was the mighty Xilin Poison King. The jianghu[14] trembled at his approach!

With due consideration for Song Qingshi's breaking point, An Long quietly took out an illusion bug. Illusion bugs weren't harmful. They could sense a person's innermost desires, then craft an illusion to satisfy those needs. Their detailed scenarios were both realistic and beautiful. Most of the time, they were fantasies of wild, unrestrained sex. He often used the bug to fend off persistent women and sometimes enjoyed it himself, so he could indulge in the taste of what he couldn't savor in real life.

Yue Wuhuan's extensive experience probably lent itself to salacious fantasies. An Long would achieve multiple ends with this plan. While Yue Wuhuan was sating his appetite, he wouldn't have the time to bother An Long. Once the illusion dissipated, An Long would reveal the contents of

the illusion and humiliate Yue Wuhuan in front of Song Qingshi. Even if they investigated and linked the bug to him, he could just pretend it was all a prank.

The illusion bug squirmed its way toward Yue Wuhuan. An Long eagerly anticipated the results.

Yue Wuhuan was by himself in the library when he suddenly felt a little dizzy.

When he awoke, he was standing beneath clouds of peach blossoms. His head was a mess, and he didn't know when or where he was. It wasn't until he saw the calluses on his hands and the hilt of his sword that he gradually remembered his past.

He was a mortal afforded a miraculous opportunity to enter the immortal realm. At first, he'd learned to cultivate from the charlatan Xie Que. After he discovered Xie Que's disgusting motives, he escaped before that fate could befall him. For many years, he braved the world alone before meeting an old sword cultivator who appreciated his talents. He accepted Yue Wuhuan as his disciple and taught him the way of the sword.

His spiritual roots weren't very strong, but he wielded the sword as though he'd known how from birth. He learned skills by watching them just once and never forgot a single one.

After his golden core developed, he killed Xie Que and traveled the world, challenging all sorts of skilled masters. He vanquished scores of wicked yuanying cultivators until he surpassed his meridians' limits and reached the yuanying level, cementing his position as a sword master. Compliments, jealousy, and admiration assailed him from all directions. Everyone praised him for his elegance and unparalleled handsomeness. He was a brilliant star, a resplendent phoenix.

He was a wild sort—he liked vibrant colors, wore gold and red brocade, flaunted his strength, and acted recklessly. During this time, he amassed flawless, stunning gems of every color: pearls, agate, sapphire, jade. He hid them in a box, waiting to give it to someone important.

His search spanned years.

In that time, he was pursued by many accomplished people: male and female cultivators, masters who'd reached fenshen level, and even youths who'd just begun to cultivate. Some wanted to be his partner; others were looking for a good time. Some he drove to madness, while others bore it quietly. He didn't like any of them. He rejected every advance, waiting patiently for the person to whom he would willingly surrender his treasure.

As he traveled the world, the hoard inside his box grew and grew, but the someone he dreamed of never appeared.

Eventually, he chose a mountain to rest upon—one with slopes covered by peach blossoms. Under those blossoms, he practiced the sword daily.

One day, he noticed that someone on a nearby mountain seemed to be watching him in the afternoons. Their presence appeared every day for about half an hour while he practiced. They never overstepped, brought him any trouble, or made him feel uncomfortable. He had gotten used to being the center of attention, so he paid no mind to this harmless observer.

But he did not expect that person to watch all ten years he spent practicing the sword under the blossoms.

They always came at the same time and never crossed the line. It was like he was just part of the scenery outside their window.

Finally, he decided to see who this person was. That night, he concealed himself from spiritual detection and snuck onto their mountain.

He crept over a monotonous expanse of bare stone. At the back of the mountain he found a medicine garden planted with peculiar herbs. Next to the garden was a simple house with a tile roof. The lights were on, and the youth inside had his nose in a book. His thick winter robe overwhelmed his slim frame. He wore no accessories. His hair was thin, fine, and hung loosely down his back, like the fur of an untidy puppy. His skin was pale, his features delicate and pretty—especially his eyes. They were clear of everything, as if not even dust could fall into them.

Pure white was more beautiful to behold than any color.

His heart galloped in his chest, but he couldn't think of a way to approach the youth. He placed the crystal he had on him in the yard, then

snuck away, hoping he'd draw the youth's notice. But the youth seemed a little obtuse. He didn't discover the crystal or notice the visit.

The youth spared time for little but research.

Every day, he sent a bird to cache gems close to the youth, sometimes by the stream, in the medicine garden, or under a tree. Each discovery astonished the youth to the point of comedy. He kept the gems in his chest of medicine, and stared at them daily, deep in thought.

That was fine, so long as the youth accepted his gifts.

He grew more and more excited each day. He kept seeking ways to lure the youth to him.

He dressed more ostentatiously, swung his sword more beautifully. He'd pierce through all of the peach blossoms floating down from the sky with his blade or part waterfalls. After finding a variety of rare herbs, he planted them on the youth's mountain.

During the lantern festival, he released a thousand colorful floating lanterns containing pearls. Their colors filled the sky, more beautiful than the stars. The lanterns had just reached the youth when he swung his sword. The lanterns went out, and pearls fell like rain all around the youth, who was quite shocked.

He watched from the shadows, laughing softly.

During the Qixi Festival, he summoned flocks of birds to land on the youth's house. They sang and chirped the entire day. Their commotion drew the hapless youth outside, but all he heard was the beautiful, moving melody of "A Phoenix Seeks His Mate."

He thought of himself as a playful bird: He displayed his beautiful plumage, then turned around, pranked the youth, and strutted away.

Unfortunately, the object of his affections, whom he'd spent so long teasing, barely understood his intent. The youth was slow, but very cute.

Amid this courtship, he left for a time to enter a secret realm in search of treasure. There, he ran into trouble and got hurt, to the point where he had to lie at home and rest for several days upon his return.

There came a hesitant knock at his door…

The youth had finally come to his mountain.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t spying on you on purpose,” the youth said, blushing. “I live on my own, and sometimes I get lonely. Seeing your beautiful colors every day makes me so happy…”

The youth had actually noticed his actions long ago and clumsily tried to imitate the gestures. The youth had stuffed the jars in his yard with elixirs and herbs as return gifts, but he had never checked those dusty jars. Now the youth had hurried to visit because he’d gotten worried after he hadn’t come out in several days.

All this time, the youth had him in his heart too.

He was so happy his wounds reopened. Luckily, his admirer had incredible medical skills, and cared for him throughout his recovery.

The youth was pure, introverted, and struggled to express himself, but he was gentle and meticulous. He never made a single mistake.

Whenever the youth’s earnest gaze landed on him, his heart leaped.

Once he was recovered, he dragged the youth to see the most beautiful scenery: verdant forests, vivid beach sunsets, glittering gem mines, roaring rivers at the bottom of deep caverns, and the exhilarating places above the clouds… They upheld justice, cared for people, healed wounds, explored untraveled lands, drank wine, and watched operas.

Slowly, the youth’s shyness turned to familiarity, and he started speaking freely.

At last, the youth’s clear, untainted eyes reflected only him. The object of his affection’s laughter was filled with his name. The phoenix nested, and his treasured gems found a home.

The youth told him earnestly:

“Wuhuan, I like you.”

“Wuhuan, I like you.”

“Wuhuan, I like you.”

In response, he gave the youth chests full of the world's finest gems, the world's most exquisite flowers, medicinal herbs and medical textbooks —everything he liked.

They traveled everywhere, saw every beautiful thing there was to see, drank good wine and ate good food. They were the closest of companions, living free. In the end, they made a home.

He jolted awake in the middle of one night, feeling uneasy, like he'd forgotten something.

There was a mirror in front of the bed.

He realized that not once in his life had he peered in a mirror. He'd never seen his own face, though he had a vague impression of what he looked like.

How strange and unsettling.

He rose from the bed as though under a power not his own and walked to the mirror. He disrobed, and looked.

There was a familiar yet strange youth in the mirror. He was around twenty-five or twenty-six, tall, and well-proportioned. He had tight muscles, no fat, and even his thin waist hid coils of strength. He wasn't too delicate, but he was still handsome. His fierce, flawless phoenix eyes contained a nobility that could not be tainted.

That was right. That was what he should look like.

He let out a sigh of relief.

Abruptly, the image in the mirror began to contort. A bright red mole marred his cheek under the left eye, bringing a sudden obscenity to his appearance. It smashed his grandeur and sullied his purity. His body softened—*weakened*—until he looked like a young man. His strength failed. His forthright beauty spoiled. A scorching brand hissed across his back, plunging him into a filthy, tainted abyss…

In a panic, he drew his sword and smashed the mirror.

The dream ended.

When he woke up from the illusion, it felt like hours before he could catch his breath. He stared at his smooth, uncalloused fingers, then the

mirror, at the body he couldn’t bear to see. His beauty and his mole seemed to mock his delusion.

He had no power. No reputation. No gems, no friends, no home.

He was Yue Wuhuan, still, a filthy beast with absolutely nothing to his name.

The mirror landed on the floor, shattering into pieces.

So dirty. Everything is so dirty…

He couldn’t breathe or speak. He curled up in the darkness, trembling. His chest hurt so much it felt like it was about to split in two. His nails carved bloody trails on his skin. As he struggled for breath, he gaped like a dying, suffocating fish. He could only watch from the sidelines as he stepped closer and closer to the brink of death.

The door to the library slammed open.

Song Qingshi had detected that something was wrong. He rushed in to gather Yue Wuhuan in his arms.

Yue Wuhuan tried to call out the youth’s name or anything else but could only manage a hoarse cry.

How pathetic. He thought he’d come to rely on Song Qingshi only after accepting his kindness in the Medicine King’s Valley. Now he remembered that he’d cared even when they first met by the river.

That was why Yue Wuhuan had to drag his injured body toward Song Qingshi. That was why they’d come to that beautiful misunderstanding. That was why he wanted to touch that soft hair, why his body’s state disgusted him, and why he hoped for a better life. That was why he still clutched Song Qingshi, unwilling to let go of his gentleness.

Yue Wuhuan spasmed. The world turned dark. Unable to hold himself up anymore, he slumped to the floor.

Song Qingshi called to him in panic, but he heard nothing—the only thing in his head was those enticing words:

“Wuhuan, I like you.”

Chapter 24

YUE WUHUAN'S CONDITION had come on suddenly, and it quickly spiraled out of control. Song Qingshi had no choice but to knock him out with acupuncture before he dealt with it further.

He'd worked hard to treat his patient for months, and one calamity had erased it all. Watching Yue Wuhuan's dramatic decline, Song Qingshi felt as though he'd lost all his mice again. Though he was on the verge of tears, now wasn't the time to cry.

In medicine, most experiments ended in failure. Success was only a stroke of luck.

Song Qingshi had failed many, many times before. He could handle setbacks. He needed to stand up, deal with the mess, find his mistakes, and start a new treatment plan.

He examined Yue Wuhuan and found the satiated illusion bug. He'd caught the culprit, but now he faced a new mystery. There were many uses for bugs in medicine and poison-making. Song Qingshi and An Long had known each other for hundreds of years and were quite close. They exchanged knowledge and resources on a regular basis, so Song Qingshi's knowledge of venomous bugs was quite vast. He knew most of the effects and powers of the venomous bugs of Xilin. Not all of them were harmful, including the illusion bug. Its mirages satisfied any need, but it made for a potent, addictive drug. The Thousand Poison Sect banned its use, in case anyone lacking in self-control lost themselves in the illusion and forgot their cultivation.

An Long had once offered the original Song Qingshi an illusion bug to use on himself. In the dream he'd seen a version of the Medicine King's Valley with an inexhaustible supply of rare herbs. Legendary medicines filled the treasury, and his cauldrons and pill furnaces were all top-notch. Clever, useful servants saw to his daily affairs. He spent ten years doing nothing but research.

Unfortunately, the illusion bug always left some sort of flaw. Once the flaw became apparent, the illusion shattered. For Song Qingshi, it had been that some of his medicines had unprecedented effects and that the elixirs he'd created had been rather unusual.

Even so, the world within the illusion was a paradise that could satisfy any desire. He hadn't wanted to leave. After he woke up, he recounted what he'd experienced to An Long and asked to try it again.

An Long seethed for ages afterward, and no matter how much Song Qingshi asked, he never gave him another illusion bug again.

It was a shame, but Song Qingshi put that aside and once more inspected the illusion bug for any changes. Yue Wuhuan lay still on the bed, his face ashen. Song Qingshi hated to see him like that but didn't know *what* he could've experienced in the illusion to reduce him to this state.

Song Qingshi lit calming incense and fed Yue Wuhuan soothing medicine, then loosened his belt, removed his outer robe, and inserted a few acupuncture needles. Using spiritual energy, he massaged the strain from Yue Wuhuan's muscles.

His phoenix eyes were tightly shut, and his mole was as bright as blood. He finally sank into a deep sleep.

His mole had a hypnotic effect. It was far more alluring than it had any right to be. Song Qingshi couldn't help but touch it.

As though in pain, Yue Wuhuan trembled at the weight of his fingertips.

Song Qingshi yanked his hand away and focused on the acupuncture and massage.

Clouds of calming incense lay over the room like a soothing blanket. In the darkness, Yue Wuhuan's breathing grew quiet and calm.

Song Qingshi put away his golden needles. Now, he could reflect on his mistakes—and his regrets.

He wasn't a good psychologist. His patient was doing everything to avoid worrying his doctor: faking smiles and concealing symptoms. Song Qingshi had missed it all, to the point where he'd thought Yue Wuhuan had

recovered. Yue Wuhuan was a skilled actor. In retrospect, though, there were details from their everyday life that proved the facade.

Yue Wuhuan feared Song Qingshi's disappointment. He never argued and always gave Song Qingshi what he wanted, as though there were no boundaries between them.

Yue Wuhuan seldom expressed a preference. He did whatever pleased Song Qingshi most.

Yue Wuhuan never refused Song Qingshi's requests. It was like he lived to obey.

It was wrong. All of it.

No sane person would give up everything about himself the way Yue Wuhuan had. The more Song Qingshi searched his memory, the more he despaired. He didn't know Yue Wuhuan's favorite food, colors, anything. He'd treated Yue Wuhuan's body but never understood his heart. *He'd* feared the terrible things Yue Wuhuan had suffered and *he'd* buried his head in the sand like an ostrich, waiting for his patient to recover on his own. But a hidden abscess couldn't heal. It grew deeper, until it reached bone.

Song Qingshi took a deep breath. He would determine a plan of attack.

First, he had to deal with the most urgent issue…and teach that troublesome malamute a lesson!

Jets of spiritual fire from both of Song Qingshi's lotuses flew through the air. The inferno had already claimed several buildings. Haolong slithered under a boulder in the garden, and the servants scrambled to hide.

An Long fled from one fire into another. He'd had every intention of investing in the Medicine King's Valley, and had hoped to wring a few extra benefits from Song Qingshi by playing hard-to-get. But Song Qingshi's mood soured out of nowhere! An Long's investment and his research no longer concerned Song Qingshi. He clearly intended to beat An Long to death instead.

When An Long learned why Song Qingshi was out for blood, he was so shocked his eyes and mouth gaped as he fervently begged for mercy.

“I didn’t know he really was made of glass! He can’t even handle an illusion bug?!”

“I told you!”

“It was just a *prank*!”

“Number twelve! You’re not allowed to prank him! Did you forget?”

“Aren’t we partners?! I’ll send you the crystals!”

“This partnership is over! I don’t want your crystals!”

The fire left An Long in a pitiful state, charred and smoking, but he’d appeased Song Qingshi’s anger after swearing numerous humiliating promises.

Reluctantly, Song Qingshi released An Long on the condition that he coughed up all there was to know about the illusion bug.

An Long smoldered miserably on a set of stairs, slathering his burns with salve and some bug or another.

“With the heavens above as my witness, I swear the illusion bug only preys on desire,” he said. “No way it can give someone nightmares. I never would’ve given *you* one if that was the case. In all the years I’ve handled these guys, I’ve never seen an illusion bug cause someone to break down like that. Your head disciple might be the first in all of creation. I want to know what happened too. He looks normal. How’d he get so sick?”

“Stick to the topic!” Song Qingshi snapped as he also sat down.

An Long pursed his lips. “Well, it’s not hard to find traces of the illusion left in the bug. It won’t be much, just whatever caused the strongest emotions. Use it and see for yourself.”

This was the hidden aspect of the illusion bug An Long had planned to exploit. After An Long showed him Yue Wuhuan’s dream, Song Qingshi, with his innocent brain full of medicine, would have to reckon with how filthy his head disciple really was. Plus, he could learn a little about matters of love.

However, after Yue Wuhuan’s extreme reaction, An Long didn’t dare follow through with that plan anymore. He would let Song Qingshi exact

any punishment—make him kneel on a washboard, he could take it—as long as he wasn't banned from the valley for life. An Long was desperate to avoid the ban list somehow…

Song Qingshi felt briefly tempted by the idea but refused. "I can't violate Yue Wuhuan's privacy. I'll look if he gives me permission when he wakes up."

"You're doing it *for* him. Just look. Don't overthink it."

"So I get to know all your secrets if it's for your own good?"

An Long tensed, frowned deeply, and fell into a surly silence.

They'd reached a stalemate. Neither spoke. Song Qingshi expanded his senses to Yue Wuhuan's room, checking on his vitals.

His head was beginning to ache from overthinking. How had he arrived at this dead end? Was it because he lacked empathy? Both his incarnations enjoyed cushy lives, and they'd never been bullied. If he didn't understand pain, how could he find the source of Yue Wuhuan's?

The father of medicine, Shennong, understood the theory of medicine only once he'd tasted all herbs and experienced all poisons. Should Song Qingshi do the same?

"It must be very painful." Song Qingshi's voice wavered.

"What must be very painful?" An Long's ears perked up. The Xilin Poison King's talents extended beyond murder. He was also a master of treating the sick. The Medicine King's Valley wouldn't have admitted him otherwise.

"Are you familiar with what happens to slaves?" Song Qingshi asked. He thought they could still have a professional discussion.

An Long forced the corners of his mouth to remain straight. "Somewhat."

Song Qingshi narrowed his eyes.

An Long radiated the righteous energy of a prisoner spared execution and sworn to reform. He looked ready to uphold morals, pontificate the Eight Honors and Eight Shames, and dedicate himself to socialism.

It appeared he had done some self-reflection.

Chapter 25

SONG QINGSHI DISCUSSED ANATOMY, overall wellness, internal injuries, lacerations, and other similar topics with An Long. It was a heated discussion, and as it went on, they really started to argue. Neither of them had any experience as a slave, though Song Qingshi felt confident in his analysis, having treated a victim of trauma. An Long had no way to defend his own theories. His poker face started sagging, like he was about to show his teeth.

Little Qingshi was too cute. Unfortunately, he maintained a difficult balance between his two spiritual fires. His spiritual power called forth the blaze of the red lotus, while the flames of the underworld were contained by that same spiritual power. Hellfire would escape his body and burn down everything around him if his powers were sealed. If they weren't contained, the two fires would combine and spark an uncontrollable inferno. All the artifacts that controlled or restrained cultivators or their powers didn't work on him. In battle, the only option would be to kill him. There was no way to capture, imprison, or intimidate him.

How unfortunate. Otherwise An Long would've kidnapped his treasure and taken him back to the Thousand Poison Sect long ago. An Long was certain he would warm to his company with a little persuasion.

An Long held in his laughter. "Well, there's no point discussing it further. If we want the answer, we need real experience."

That made sense to Song Qingshi.

"But don't count on me." An Long puffed out his chest to emphasize his large, tall frame and intimidating tattoos. "The guy who could push me around hasn't been born. Even if I'm happy to help out a friend, I can't do it."

He had a point. With An Long's build and personality, no one dared approach him, never mind attack.

"Why don't you try?" An Long suggested.

Song Qingshi hesitated.

“Don’t pick just anyone,” An Long said. “If you get hurt, there’s a possibility you’ll lose control of your poisonous fire. That’s very dangerous. You should find someone who’s powerful enough, who knows you well.”

“I can control the flames even if I’m passed out, as long as I have my powers.”

“Who would dare touch the famous Medicine King?” An Long’s invisible wolf tail swished. “Do you have another friend in this realm who could help? Why don’t I make the sacrifice and bully you? For science, of course.”

The logic was sound, even if he seemed a little too eager.

Song Qingshi considered it for a solid fifteen minutes before he rejected the suggestion.

“No.”

His hesitation gave An Long some brief hope, but he’d played his hand too early. Song Qingshi could see his pointy wolf ears under the fleece.

“Are you messing with me right now?” Song Qingshi asked. The Alaskan malamute had pranked him more times than he could count. His trust in dogs was nearly at zero.

“Of course not!”

Song Qingshi pressed the accusation. “Your face just now said otherwise. You get that look when you want to see me make a fool of myself.”

An Long thought over his track record and couldn’t deny it.

Song Qingshi wondered if he’d been too harsh on An Long. Either way, the point was not that being pushed around was *painful*. It went deeper than that. He gave up on explaining.

“Never mind, this isn’t helpful. I got ahead of myself. Let’s never mention it again.”

An Long felt the succulent meat in his mouth fly free. He sulked in the corner.

Haolong slithered in, ignored its despondent owner, and looped itself around Song Qingshi's waist. Song Qingshi made to nuzzle it when his senses alerted him that Yue Wuhuan was awake. He extricated himself from Haolong's embrace, threw it over An Long, and ran out.

Haolong was stricken at yet again failing to win Song Qingshi's affections.

An Long patted its head reassuringly. "There, there."

Yue Wuhuan sat on the edge of the bed. He could breathe without struggle, but his thoughts reeled, and he couldn't identify the emotions he felt. His memories clashed. What had been real? Reality was unbearable and disgusting. The illusion had brought him incalculable joy, but it had also mocked him with the person he'd so desperately longed for. He felt like he was about to go crazy.

He faced himself in the mirror, shaking. The mole beneath his eye stared back, and he suddenly had an eerie thought.

If he didn't have the mole, could he be the person in the illusion again, the one the youth had liked?

His eyes roamed the room. Song Qingshi had removed all the sharp objects, so he smashed a ceramic box on the table, picked up a shard, and cut beneath his left eye. His hand shook and the ceramic wasn't very sharp. That was fine. He couldn't feel pain or the warm spatter of blood running down his fingers. He sliced once, twice, more, again until he'd excised the deformity. He cupped it in his palm.

The door opened. The youth appeared before him, haloed in stunning sunlight.

"Qingshi, you're back?" Yue Wuhuan asked with a smile of anticipation.

Song Qingshi nearly fell to his knees in fear. Blood dripped down Yue Wuhuan's beautiful face as he held the ceramic shard in his hand.

I barely touched the mole! Did he really need to remove it entirely?

Song Qingshi rushed forward, grabbing the weapon and chunk of flesh, and started to treat Yue Wuhuan's wound. He'd cut too haphazardly,

nearly ruining half his beautiful face.

Nevertheless, he beamed at Song Qingshi. “Don’t worry, I’m fine,” he said gently.

“Right, you’re fine. You’re fine,” Song Qingshi said, though his voice was trembling “You have wood elemental spiritual roots. It won’t leave a scar.”

Who was he saying that for, himself or Yue Wuhuan? Besides, a scar wasn’t the issue! What was Song Qingshi going to do about his patient’s mental state? The doctor thought he might have a breakdown too.

“Has he really lost it?” An Long and Haolong poked their heads around the doorframe. An Long had a feeling that if he didn’t bring something truly precious as a peace offering, he might really get kicked out of the Medicine King’s Valley for good.

“What was I thinking?” he muttered. “What harm could a patient as sick as this do? Why did I go and provoke him?”

Chapter 26

AN LONG TOOK OUT a creature known as the lock bug. It was one of his secret specimens; Song Qingshi had never seen or heard of it.

An Long used the lock bug for treatments. It looked like a miniature silk worm, a white, soft grub without fangs or claws—adorable, really. It had no physical defenses, only the ability to absorb human desires and emotions. Similar to a valve, it allowed the user to control the flow of their emotions. Their overwhelming feelings sustained the lock bug, and in return it stabilized their mood.

The lock bug was more precise than any medicine Song Qingshi could prescribe, and it even trumped his first line of treatment (using sedatives).

An Long swore up and down that using the lock bug had no harmful effects. It didn't react except to absorb whatever feeling the user wanted it to. Nobody could compel it to cause harm.

Song Qingshi tried it himself and found it to be true. An Long really had raised the lock bug for mental health treatment purposes. This baffled Qingshi.

An Long loved dangerous bugs, the more brutal the better. Some had additional supportive effects, but he mostly used them for investigation, interrogation, and control. When it came to his own health, he relied on his cultivation, his sect's preexisting bug regimens, and the valley's elixirs. Overall, he had a hardy constitution and no need to cultivate an insect like this, one with a complicated physiology that required meticulous care. Only the Thousand Poison Sect's rare, boisterous genius could've created this, but why did he have something so useless to him?

Song Qingshi asked directly.

An Long chuckled. "Because I wanted to be friends with you."

The original Song Qingshi had patiently dealt with all of An Long's antics and tolerated his presence because he had considerable medical knowledge. He knew unconventional applications for poisons and was

talented in that regard. That Song Qingshi had cleaned up many of An Long's messes, healed his wounds, and developed medicines for bug husbandry, so…this was a gift?

Song Qingshi's suspicion disappeared. With the lock bug in hand, he went to Yue Wuhuan.

Yue Wuhuan woke up bleary, still under the influence of a calming drug, with bandages wrapped around his face. He had cut deep, but he could feel that the damage wasn't serious. He had never suffered a wound his wood-type abilities couldn't heal. Not one of the indignities he'd suffered ever resulted in a scar.

It saved him. It doomed him. He would've disfigured himself at Golden Phoenix Mountain, otherwise.

But Yue Wuhuan hadn't been trying to ruin his appearance when he dug out his mole. He still possessed of a sliver of clarity, and afterward, ashamed of troubling Song Qingshi, he apologized at length. He swore to take his medicine on time and promised not to relapse again. However, when he spoke, he could not look at Song Qingshi, and his hands shook as though he were holding back some great pain.

One of Song Qingshi's female upperclassmen had once told him that a man's mouth is the source of all lies. He couldn't trust Yue Wuhuan—but he could trust the lock bug.

After learning about the insect, Yue Wuhuan accepted it, knowing he had no better choice. His tremors ceased half an hour after the lock bug squirmed inside him, and his mood improved. When he put a hand over his heart, the motion was relaxed. The bug had siphoned much of his hidden desires, and now he could look at Song Qingshi without a facade. It made him come alive.

Song Qingshi explained what had happened with the illusion bug and asked what he'd seen in the illusion. "Though, if you don't want to tell me, I'll respect your wishes…"

"I want to keep it a secret," Yue Wuhuan said without hesitation.

Song Qingshi handed him the box that held the illusion bug, but Yue Wuhuan pushed it back after a moment's consideration.

"Zunzhu, you keep it. I'm only mortal. I'll depart the world someday. When that happens, please…open the box and look inside."

He wanted to let go of his shameful longing. He only hoped that after he died, Song Qingshi could learn how he felt.

"All right." Song Qingshi had never feared death, so wills did not scare him. He stowed the illusion bug in his interspatial bag and changed the subject. "I won't take the Thousand Poison Sect's investment. I made a hasty decision. An Long will definitely try to talk me into mixing personal matters with business again, but his personality's a big liability, so who knows what'll happen? Night Rain Pavilion can handle distribution instead. Although Ye Lin is greedy, he knows the right people, and you can trust him. We'll lose some profits, but we'll live in peace."

He was truly afraid of the Alaskan malamute now. What if he made a nuisance of himself *every day*?

They needed time to increase production, so the Medicine King's Valley would endure want a little longer. The money didn't concern Song Qingshi—Yue Wuhuan occupied his thoughts instead. He couldn't spare attention for anything else. His other research would go on the backburner, except for his mice, and they'd fund production by selling some of the artifacts they never used. If everyone did their best to save money for a while, they'd weather the storm. Besides, he never knew when a wizened elder from Five Mountain Sect might contract a weird disease and require his help!

Yue Wuhuan nodded. "Yes, Zunzhu."

Song Qingshi took a bottle of purple flower dew from the treasury. An Long coveted the beneficial elixir enough to beg for it. The ingredients to make it had long since disappeared, so it was valuable—more than a fair trade for the lock bug. It pained Song Qingshi, both the current one and the original, to part with such a rare drug. He cared more about medicine than his own life! Still, he had to return the favor no matter how much it hurt him.

Song Qingshi reluctantly handed the bottle of dew to An Long.

He understood at once. “Are you chasing me off?”

“I need to focus on Wuhuan.” Song Qingshi ground his teeth through the pain. “I don’t have time to entertain you anymore.”

“Well…” An Long looked at him for a long time, then burst into laughter. He shook the purple flower dew in his hands. “Since you’re feeling sincere enough to bring out the good stuff, I’ll accept it.”

At their imminent parting, Haolong wound itself around Song Qingshi’s limbs, refusing to let go.

Presented with the opportunity, An Long bent down and lamented, “I wasted so much time talking business. Shouldn’t I get some kind of compensation?”

Song Qingshi didn’t even have the money to fix the buildings they’d flattened. How was he supposed to pay him back?

An Long dragged Song Qingshi into his arms, trapping him there, then sank his teeth into Qingshi’s neck like he was a predator striking. He drew blood. Song Qingshi’s shield couldn’t withstand a hulking body cultivator’s iron jaw. Alarm bells ringing, he summoned his spiritual fire in defense, and An Long only let go at the first lick of flame on his lips.

He chased the blood smeared over his mouth with his tongue. “You taste just as good as I imagined.”

How had he ever wasted sympathy on this Alaskan malamute? Song Qingshi sent him on his way with a decisive kick.

Haolong was still wrapped around his waist. It bobbed its head at An Long, smugly bidding its owner goodbye. By the time it realized Song Qingshi was looking at it with displeasure in his gaze, it was too late to slither into the bushes.

Song Qingshi couldn’t let it stay. He grabbed it by the tip of its tail and whipped it outside, then stomped off to disinfect the wound on his neck.

The gates of the Medicine King’s Valley clattered shut. The poisonous mist parted, revealing the path. Haolong writhed on the ground in sorrow, unwilling to leave. Its eyes were full of desolation as it gazed in the direction of the man that had betrayed it.

“You just don’t learn.” An Long grabbed Haolong in one hand as he scolded it. “So what if Little Qingshi saved you? So what if he used to be so sweet and caring? Once you’ve recovered, you need to get over it. There’s no use pitching a fit. He doesn’t want you anymore. How many times does he have to reject you before it gets through your head?”

Haolong crawled up his shoulder, curled up, and hung flaccid.

It had been a useless worm when it’d first met Song Qingshi. The bigger beasts subjected it to torment every day. Song Qingshi saved it from being burned to death by poisonous fire, didn’t judge its ugly appearance, and changed its dressings every day. He even put it against his chest to warm up and gave it the precious spiritual medicine that had first drawn him to the secret realm. At the time, nothing else seemed to matter to Song Qingshi…

It thought it was special and wanted to become Song Qingshi’s pet. But after its recovery, Song Qingshi surrendered its care to An Long. It tried to prove its worth to Song Qingshi and cultivated matchless bestial strength. But in the end, even though it begged without a shred of dignity, Song Qingshi still never gave it the chance to remain at his side.

“You’re not special.” An Long patted Haolong, but it wasn’t clear if his words were intended for the snake. “No one is. However kindly he treated you is how cold he’ll be afterward. No one stays by his side forever.”

Song Qingshi could be so caring, but he was just as cruel. Five hundred years ago, he’d taught An Long what utter despair and hopeless darkness tasted like.

An Long couldn’t help but burst into sardonic laughter. He turned back to look at the Medicine King’s Valley as it slowly disappeared into the mist.

“Too bad Qingshi just gets cuter and cuter… I wonder what that beauty will look like when he catches on. I can almost picture how good the panic will look on his face.”

He gave Haolong a final, firm pat on the head, then his face turned menacing once more.

“Little bro, don’t be sad. Let’s do something fun. I just remembered someone I’ve got to deal with…”

Chapter 27

YUE WUHUAN'S SWORD SKILLS grew more sophisticated by the day.

Cultivation had always come easily. He understood cultivation manuals on the first read, and using his spiritual energy was as natural as breathing. He was born to be a cultivator; he was only limited by his mortal body's weak meridians and dantian. They wouldn't improve with regular cultivation either, so he relied on sword training to help him.

The events of the illusion kept flashing before his eyes.

He took a deep breath. After calming down, he suddenly realized the swordplay he'd learned in the illusion had become part of him, like he'd practiced it countless times. He thrust the sword downward and diagonally. This simple movement could destroy three of the most common protective artifacts used in the immortal realm. If he followed the stroke to its conclusion, it could pierce someone's heart. He'd never used a sword to kill. Why did he know the motions as if he'd done it before?

The illusion bug didn't have that kind of power. Otherwise it would be a priceless resource, not an idle fancy.

Yue Wuhuan stared at the hilt in his hand. His head started to ache. Some inexorable pressure kept him from the answer. Then it whispered an alternative to him, though it barely made sense: Miracles occurred in the immortal realm every day. Perhaps the illusion bug had been his.

Song Qingshi peeked out from the walkway. Yue Wuhuan wasn't sure how long he'd been watching but dropped his stance.

Song Qingshi held a book and charcoal pencil. He gestured for Yue Wuhuan to join him on the nearby stone bench and fixed him with a look of intense concentration. Finally, he opened the book. *Hobbies* was written on the first page.

"What is this?"

Song Qingshi tried to push down his mortification at doing something middle school girls did for their idols. Yue Wuhuan hid himself

well, and Song Qingshi was no expert at understanding others, so it was hard for him to gauge Yue Wuhuan's intent or guess at his thoughts. Song Qingshi preferred to act openly. If he could not wheedle the necessary information from Yue Wuhuan, he would ask—and record it for posterity. That way, he wouldn't make any more mistakes.

"You're not allowed to lie. You have to answer honestly." Song Qingshi tried to channel a doctor's dignity. "What's your favorite food, Wuhuan?"

"I like sweets, obviously," he said in jest.

"Be serious. Don't pick something I like." Song Qingshi shot him an exasperated look. He'd thought Wuhuan liked the milk cakes in Yue City but realized afterward that he'd tolerated them for his sake, just like the ice cream.

"I don't like anything in particular." Yue Wuhuan gave it some thought. "There were times I couldn't eat, which damaged my stomach, and I can't handle much now. These days, I like the fasting elixir. It saves time."

Song Qingshi wrote *Stomach medicine*. "Okay. What else do you like?"

Yue Wuhuan was silent for a long time. He seemed to be smiling with his eyes. "I like Zunzhu. You're very kind."

Song Qingshi felt himself blush. "I meant things."

"Nothing in particular. You've given me so much." Yue Wuhuan chuckled. He would have liked his box of gems, but Song Qingshi had spent a great deal of money on him already. There was no need to add to his troubles.

"What's your favorite color?"

"White."

"Favorite activity?"

"Sword practice, making medicine, reading, and studying."

Yue Wuhuan's answers flowed smoothly. There was nothing wrong with them.

Song Qingshi arrived at the last question. "When's your birthday?"

“The fourteenth of February.”

Song Qingshi stopped writing when he heard that special date.

“What, is there something wrong with that day?” Yue Wuhuan asked.

Song Qingshi held his laughter and shook his head. Valentine’s Day didn’t exist here. He thought of the world he came from, where he watched over the lab in place of his dating upperclassmen, ferried gifts and roses to his female upperclassmen, and made reservations for his parents’ candlelit dinners and opera tickets. He spent the holiday eating instant noodles with his mice. (Everyone joked he was destined to love a mouse spirit.)

Yue Wuhuan watched Song Qingshi snicker and grew more confused. He didn’t understand what Song Qingshi was so happy about.

Song Qingshi closed his book. He’d collected sufficient data, and Yue Wuhuan’s birthday was next month. Perfect timing. He’d already sent Night Rain Pavilion a dozen rushed letters. He now had the spirit essence and clues to Xie Que’s whereabouts. When Yue Wuhuan’s birthday arrived, Song Qingshi could give him a big surprise. It might improve his mood and prompt him to forget the weird illusion.

To make sure Yue Wuhuan didn’t relapse, of course.

Yue Wuhuan’s face was mostly recovered but for one peculiar thing: Though he’d excised it completely, the mole had grown back. Song Qingshi suspected that Yue Wuhuan hadn’t done it cleanly enough, and offered to extract it for fear that he’d try again. When he changed Yue Wuhuan’s bandages the next morning, the mole had grown back once again, brighter and more dazzling than before.

Song Qingshi had never seen such a thing. But after looking into it, he couldn’t find anything unusual about the mole. Science explained little of the immortal realm. Perhaps this was a birthmark that couldn’t be removed?

Yue Wuhuan reassured him that he’d given up on getting rid of the mole, and the lock bug would prevent further episodes. Song Qingshi refused to believe him. Yuanying cultivators had enhanced senses, but he couldn’t surveil Yue Wuhuan twenty-four hours a day. Besides, he couldn’t multitask. Whatever he did earned his full attention. At some point, he’d forget to check in.

So he rarely left Yue Wuhuan’s side, not even for sleep. He decided to sleep on the floor next to Yue Wuhuan’s bed the way a patient’s family did to keep them company. He’d take a little embarrassment over the worse option. If he slept in his own bedroom, he wouldn’t know if he’d failed the class.

Yue Wuhuan was shocked the first time he woke up in the middle of the night and discovered Song Qingshi in his room. Even in his wildest dreams, he’d never imagined his teacher would do something so stupid! He debated for a moment whether it was better to wake Song Qingshi or to pretend he hadn’t seen, but both options were awkward.

In the end, he gritted his teeth and shook Song Qingshi awake.

“Zunzhu, you’re so tired you fell asleep here. It’s so cold on the floor.”

Song Qingshi refused to take the out. “It’s fine. I’ll stay here.”

Yue Wuhuan knew he had caused this, but he wasn’t sure how to fix it. “Well, maybe you could sleep on the bed, and—”

He had wanted to offer to switch places.

Song Qingshi’s eyes lit up, and he clambered into bed without hesitation. A few days on the floor had left the pampered doctor stiff and creaky. He could forget such hardship now that his sweet little angel had invited him in! How blessed, that he’d lower his guard for Song Qingshi. A bit of contact could hasten his recovery!

He was a righteous man. His angel was the *male* lead. They could share a bed without flouting propriety. Beds in the immortal realm were quite large and had space enough for two or even three people.

Song Qingshi was so moved that he crawled across the bed with his blanket, spread it out, and lay a safe distance away from Yue Wuhuan, on his own pillow.

“Don’t worry! I’m a deep sleeper and won’t move an inch,” Song Qingshi promised. “I’ll wake up however I fall asleep. And I’d *never* take advantage of you.”

Yue Wuhuan didn’t know what to say to that.

Song Qingshi hadn’t slept well for several nights and quickly fell to snoring, open and defenseless as he hugged his blanket. His messy hair spread over the covers. His ice-silk pajamas climbed up, revealing a glimpse of his pale stomach.

Yue Wuhuan used the lock bug several times before he got his thoughts under control. He tucked Song Qingshi’s blanket firmly around him, then lay down. But sleep refused him. His traumatic past and his pretty face belied the possessive, stubborn temperament he’d been born with. He wanted to conquer, control, and subdue someone entirely. They would care about him and him alone. Only by devouring them could he feel joy.

Song Qingshi’s thoughts were simple. He didn’t understand all this. He cared for Yue Wuhuan and trusted him.

He couldn’t touch. He couldn’t act. He couldn’t allow any filthy thoughts.

Yue Wuhuan’s temperature ran high, while Song Qingshi practiced a cultivation method called “Icy Jade” to control his two fires. It lowered his body temperature, so he fumbled for the heat source next to him and snuggled closer in his sleep. When he found it, he rubbed himself against it, satisfied.

First, Yue Wuhuan smelled a delicious medicinal fragrance. Then a warm breath caressed his neck. Song Qingshi’s embrace immobilized him from chest to waist. A leg coiled around him like the tentacle of an octopus wound around its prey, and it would not loosen even an inch.

“Zunzhu. Stop moving. Please let go.”

Yue Wuhuan tried to extricate himself but didn’t dare use force. He could only plead in his meekest, smallest voice that Song Qingshi refrain from torturing him to death.

He survived until morning, whereupon Song Qingshi retracted his limbs and rolled under his own blanket. He assumed the exact posture he’d had when he first fell asleep, with not a hand out of place.

The corner of Yue Wuhuan’s eye twitched. He was certain Song Qingshi had remained asleep through everything. Now, Yue Wuhuan understood where Song Qingshi’s confidence in his sleeping habits came from.

After another half an hour, the sun brightened the sky.

Song Qingshi opened his eyes and confirmed that he'd remained on his side of the bed.

"See, I'm well-behaved when I sleep, aren't I?"

Yue Wuhuan looked at him tiredly and gritted his teeth. He bit his tongue for some time, then took a deep breath. "You sure are!"

His teacher was always right. Even when he was wrong.

"Great! Then, can I sleep here again tomorrow?"

If Yue Wuhuan could accept one night, he might be persuaded to continue. It could help him get over his fear of touch to know that even if someone slept beside him, it was safe! There were plenty of people in the world without dirty thoughts. Just like Song Qingshi!

"All right." Yue Wuhuan took another deep breath. Perhaps a test of will would help him with his cultivation.

First, he had to take a cold bath.

Chapter 28

SONG QINGSHI CLIMBED into Yue Wuhuan's bed every day, and Yue Wuhuan thought of many ways to fix the situation…

He persuaded Song Qingshi to exchange his silk pajamas for his regular inner robes—the kind that wrapped around him nice and tight—using the excuse that it was getting colder, and he'd catch a chill. When Song Qingshi started to roll toward him in his sleep, Yue Wuhuan would stretch out his right arm and let Song Qingshi cling to that instead. He sometimes turned onto his side, facing away from Song Qingshi and affording him fewer opportunities to make contact. With the lock bug controlling his desires, Yue Wuhuan kept the situation under some semblance of control.

His sleep suffered, but he never thought to chase Song Qingshi away or set up a bed beside his own. When Song Qingshi hugged him in his sleep, he felt like he'd returned to his illusion. False joy was still joy. He'd rather enjoy his suffering.

Song Qingshi, though, thought they were just two men sleeping in the same bed. There were no inappropriate feelings between them. He often slept in his cousins' beds during summer vacation, and on a trip abroad in middle school, he'd slept with his upperclassman in the same bed, since they couldn't get a room with two singles. For some reason, his upperclassman had smacked him upside the head and banished him to the couch the next day, but aside from that, he had ample experience sleeping with men. No problems there!

He'd prove to Yue Wuhuan that men could behave and some humans were worth trusting. Yue Wuhuan accepted their new arrangement without complaint, though he developed a habit of bathing every morning.

Song Qingshi sniffed himself, wondering if he was the problem. He took extra baths and added perfume to the water, hoping to smell as good as possible so he wouldn't bother his roommate's sensitive nose.

Ten days later, Night Rain Pavilion's long-awaited pigeon arrived. Song Qingshi reviewed its message carefully before finding Yue Wuhuan.

"Ye Lin wrote me a letter," Song Qingshi said hesitantly. "I need to pick up some of the stuff I ordered in person, so I'll be out for a few days. Can you stay home and take care of the mice? This is usually when they breed, and I don't trust the servants with them."

"Zunzhu, if you have to leave, it must be important," Yue Wuhuan said. "I'll take care of myself. I promise to use the lock bug to control my condition and take my medicine on time. Please don't worry. If anything happens, I'll send a pigeon."

Song Qingshi let out a sigh of relief. He chose a few experienced servants who'd established a spiritual foundation to look after Yue Wuhuan, then readied the arrays and traps around the Medicine King's Valley to fend off attacks. He left a life plaque so that Yue Wuhuan would know he was safe and flew toward the Yanyun Mountains, located in Nanchuan.

Upon reaching the mountain he sought, Song Qingshi directed his spirit beast to land. Here on Ruoxu Peak, he was surrounded by flowing rivers and fierce waterfalls draped in clouds. The place looked quite unreal. He hadn't seen towns or cities for miles, only tiny mortal villages, nor had he sensed concentrated spiritual energy or nearby secret realms. No spiritual plants or creatures lived here. This was a rare place, untouched by cultivators.

Song Qingshi's anger flared and his expression turned cold.

Ye Lin's letter said Xie Que had finally returned to the sect he'd established, the place Yue Wuhuan had grown up: Yan Mountain Sect. He lured mortal children to this hinterland with stories of paradise. They had no contact with outsiders and learned rudimentary cultivation skills, rather than anything they needed to protect themselves.

Instead, they were brainwashed by Xie Que. He put on a good show, teaching them how to dress as cultivators, how to act like them, and that they must protect their hands, since Yan Mountain cultivated through music. He convinced them he cared about them and couldn't let them suffer a single injury.

He was a skilled actor.

The original Song Qingshi once had the opportunity to be close to Yue Wuhuan. Unfortunately, he hadn't realized Xie Que's true self at the time. Song Qingshi had missed his chance.

He felt responsible for the previous Song Qingshi's actions, as though he'd taken them himself. Whenever he thought of it, he was overcome with guilt. Why hadn't the system sent him to a point in time when he could slap that medicine-brained man into oblivion?

Yue Wuhuan didn't care. He couldn't blame his savior for missing what even he hadn't realized at the time. When he'd looked back on the past, he couldn't explain his ignorance either.

"I should have noticed earlier, but for some reason, I missed every sign. Some things were too close to be a coincidence, but I still didn't see. It's like I was meant to go through that."

Either way, it was Xie Que's fault.

Song Qingshi summoned a cloud of dragonflies and butterflies with a wave of his hand. They swept over the mountainside, searching for Xie Que's location, and his spiritual senses followed the movement of their eyes. This made his spiritual presence harder to detect. An Long had taught Song Qingshi that trick soon after establishing a foundation, though he himself had used it to control a snake and scare people in the bath. After Song Qingshi caught him, he gave up his secret. Song Qingshi adjusted it a bit until it suited his needs well.

He followed in the insects' wake as they swarmed toward Yan Mountain Sect.

Soon, it came into view. Blossoming trees stood around a dozen white buildings with blue-tiled roofs. Mortal servants bustled about taking care of chickens, ducks, and geese. In the yard, some friendly dogs lay belly-up, enjoying the sun. Though the dogs looked ordinary, they were actually spirit dogs—expert trackers, there to keep slaves from running away.

Song Qingshi hid his presence and sat on the branch of a flowering tree. His bugs searched room by room. There were twenty or so kids in the sect, their ages ranging from six to eighteen. In their neat, blue robes, they

looked no different from the disciples of other sects, but for one disquieting trait: They were *lovely*. They all had something special about their appearances, and their radiant complexions glowed.

The disciples seemed close. The older ones helped the younger with homework. In the field, a bright, sunny youth instructed a novice in archery, telling him the importance of keeping the body soft and flexible while training. Under a tree, a girl no older than thirteen helped another through her recitation. The latter plodded through each line of the book. Her tutor rapped her on the head, chiding her. If she continued like this, she'd be the bottom of the barrel again—heavens knew why their teacher picked her. The slower girl simpered and started to cry, and her friend's frustration disappeared in an instant. In the kitchen, a nimble boy of around eight or nine tried to steal a steamed bun.

Song Qingshi felt dazed as he watched them through his hundred eyes. They were happy. They had never known pain. They lived like they were in paradise, and all the while the chasm widened underneath them…

Finally, Xie Que appeared in the kitchen. He snatched the bun-thief by the wrist and dragged him to the study. Song Qingshi sent a butterfly to stick itself to the window.

Inside, a soft, delicate-looking girl was copying lines from a book. Each of her strokes were like crisp pines or sturdy bamboo. She had potential—the makings of a master. Xie Que brought the boy in, handed him over to the girl, and asked her to supervise his punishment. The girl agreed softly and began to walk the boy through handling a brush.

Xie Que sighed. "You're such a troublemaker. Can't you learn to be more like your Wuhuan-shixiong?[15] When he was your age, he had impeccable handwriting and had memorized every book in the library."

"You keep wanting me to be like Wuhuan-shixiong! You talk about him so much." The boy huffed. "Well, Wuhuan-shixiong left for a famous sect but hasn't come to see you once! Clearly, he's ungrateful!"

Song Qingshi froze for a moment before studying the boy. With his shapely brows, he almost looked like Yue Wuhuan, but he had large almond eyes and wasn't quite as elegant. With his hackles raised, he seemed more like a wild, unruly cat.

“Don’t be rude,” the girl scolded. She knocked him on the head.

“Yes, yes, yes. It’s my fault. You’re different from Wuhuan.” Xie Que took a long, careful look at him, then laughed. “But my Minghong is more grateful. You’ll do great things, someday.”

Minghong lowered his head in embarrassment. “I’m only here today because Shifu took me off the streets. Hong-er[16] loves Shifu the most! I won’t disappoint you.”

“Then I’ll be waiting.”

Xie Que patted him on the head. A loving teacher and a filial disciple—what a beautiful scene.

Song Qingshi couldn’t stomach any more. He didn’t want to involve others. He summoned his fated weapons, and two lotuses of spiritual fires soon bloomed in his palms. As he raised his hands, the blaze of the red lotus floated into the study, expanded, and engulfed the room in a fiery barrier. Then, Song Qingshi entered, hellfire in hand.

Xie Que was terrified and leaped back, but on seeing Song Qingshi’s face, he gathered a little composure. He smiled, trembling.

“To what do I owe the honor of the Medicine King’s visit? It’s been ten years since we last saw each other. I’m still so grateful you saved Wuhuan. Although I’m not sure what brings you here today, if I can help with anything, I’ll gladly provide.”

The girl grabbed Minghong and pulled him to hide behind their teacher.

A jet of fire wrapped around Xie Que’s face. He screamed. The flames of the underworld ate at his skin like dry tinder, and ashy flesh sloughed off his face, revealing bone.

“You don’t need this face,” Song Qingshi said.

Xie Que writhed in pain on the floor. He had secluded himself in his efforts to avoid Pine Crane Sect, and they’d only recently reached an agreement. Master He had several bastard sons, so he could spare Bai Zihao. Apparently, Jin Feiren had developed real feelings for the boy. Golden Phoenix Mountain paid an obscene fee to settle the issue, and Jin Feiren promised to treat Bai Zihao right, freeing him from enslavement. Xie

Que further appeased the sect by returning the money he'd made on Bai Zihao's sale, gave Master He a beautiful slave by way of apology, and everything came to an end.

Thanks to how busy he'd been, he hadn't paid attention to much else.

Yue Wuhuan had been his biggest sale, but that was over ten years ago. He'd been broken in since then and wasn't worth consideration anymore. Xie Que heard Yue Wuhuan had gone to the Medicine King's Valley, but if he ended up as a misbegotten experiment, it wouldn't trouble Xie Que—even if he felt a little wistful. He had taken care of that beauty so tenderly; there was no way he would ever create a second Yue Wuhuan.

Xie Que hissed in pain. Yue Wuhuan's honeyed words must have led the Medicine King here in such a state. That child had always been cunning. He'd spent a lot of effort to keep the truth from him, but now…

Xie Que dragged himself across the floor, smiling even with a mangled face. "Xianzun, there's been a terrible mistake. Golden Phoenix Mountain forced me to give up Wuhuan because they wanted him. I'd never have parted with him, but…"

While he feigned innocence, his brain was running overtime to find a way to get out of this.

"You're a bad man! Don't hurt Shifu!" Minghong couldn't hold himself back. He threw himself onto Song Qingshi's leg and bit down, but he couldn't even rip through the robe. Through tears, he let out a shrill cry, like a little dog protecting its owner.

The girl screamed fearfully. "Minghong! Come back!"

His eyes red, Minghong kicked and bit with what little power he had, deaf to the world. He'd die trying to hold off this villain, if only his teacher would run. Song Qingshi examined the child's furious eyes and his mouthful of cloth. His face merged with the one in Song Qingshi's memory…

Hong-er loves Shifu the most. I won't disappoint you.

Wuhuan loves Shifu the most. I don't want to embarrass you.

Slowly, Song Qingshi looked from Minghong to Xie Que's cowering form. "He's just like Wuhuan."

Chapter 29

XIE QUE WAS FULL OF LIES. Nothing he said was worth listening to.

The black lotus in Song Qingshi's palm flared, and four tendrils of poisonous fire snaked up Xie Que's limbs. His flesh blackened at their touch. Xie Que reached for his neck and tore off his jade pendant. A golden array spread from it, managing to absorb half the attack without consequence until the jade turned a poisonous black and shattered into dust. The leftover tendrils of flame leaped at Xie Que, dipping and winding as they bored holes through the flesh of his legs.

Xie Que was not that talented or powerful, but after selling slaves for so many years, he did have a few strong artifacts to save his life in a pinch.

He lay helplessly on the floor, struggling backward. "Spare me, Zunzhu, please. Take everything. If you like Wuhuan, then take Minghong, take him too. He looks like Wuhuan when he was younger…"

Minghong seized up, not understanding what his teacher meant.

"They're just the same," Xie Que continued, still retreating. "Such troublemakers at that age. Look at Minghong's face. Except for his eyes, they look similar… Zunzhu, don't you want to know about Wuhuan's past?"

As the poisonous fire ate away at him, his spiritual powers grew weaker and weaker.

The soft, weak girl hiding to the side finally fought off whatever was controlling her and threw herself forward, ripping the scroll from the wall behind Xie Que.

Xie Que spat blood in anger and roared, "Traitor!"

A delivery array was drawn beneath the scroll—something to carry Xie Que away, which he'd had set up ages ago to save his life in an emergency. He had been slithering toward the array in an attempt to escape. *That* was why he had repeatedly tried to distract Song Qingshi with Yue Wuhuan's name.

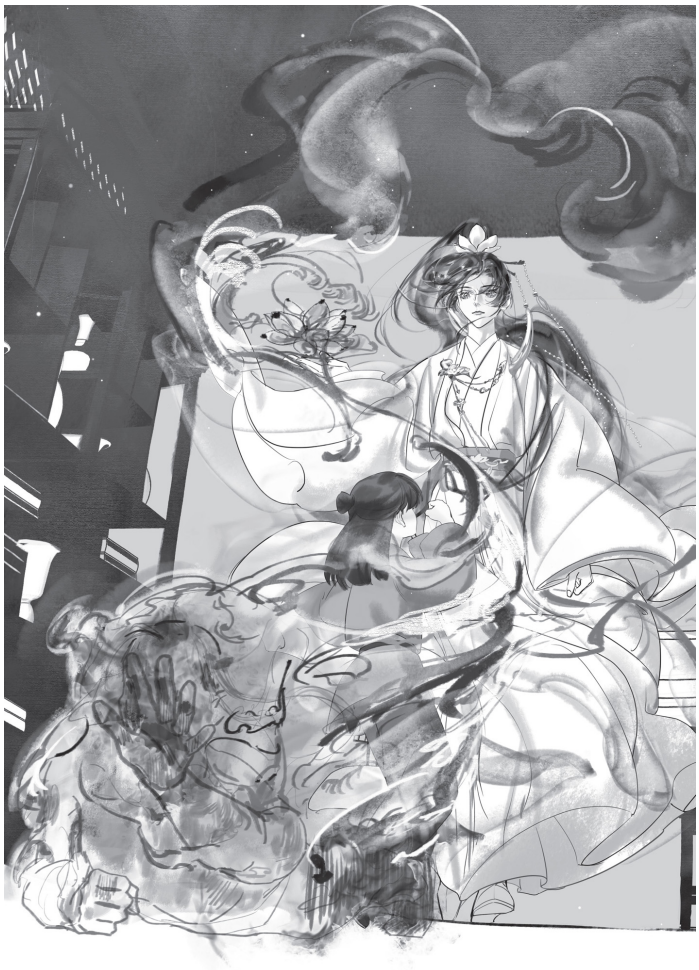
Xie Que was wrapped in the flames of the underworld, so even if he fled, death was all that awaited him. Still, that would ruin Song Qingshi's plan.

There were more dismal fates in the immortal realm than death.

The black lotus in Song Qingshi's hand opened. Black fire swallowed Xie Que's hands and feet, rendering him immobile. Then, Song Qingshi's spiritual senses pierced Xie Que's mind to find the life seal's secret spell. There was a huge amount of information inside him, and Song Qingshi's cultivation was only strong enough to see things that happened in recent years, but Xie Que frequently branded slaves. Song Qingshi just needed one thing: the last time he'd done it.

The scene took shape in his mind's eye.

The young girl overheard Xie Que talking about the selling of the slaves. She ran, but the spirit dogs caught her. Xie Que locked her in an array, and she wept as the demon carved her back with each stroke of a sinful tattoo. She cried and begged throughout, to no avail, until he stamped the life seal with his secret spell: the words *Xie Que* forged in ancient runes. He smiled as he watched her tears, as though he was looking at an animal he was proud to slaughter.



Song Qingshi retracted his senses, destroying Xie Que's mind. He shepherded Xie Que's soul into a container he'd prepared earlier.

"You know everything?" Song Qingshi asked the girl.

This girl—Qingluan—was the one he'd seen in Xie Que's mind.

Qingluan sat for a while, stunned. Then she realized what Xie Que's end implied. Long-suppressed emotions welled up, and she started to sob. Song Qingshi reached out, wanting to use his power to soothe her emotions, but Minghong threw himself at Song Qingshi again.

"Bad guy!" Minghong sobbed through his words. "You already killed Shifu. Don't hurt Qingluan-jiejie!"[17]

Although he thought his teacher's words seemed off, he couldn't accept that the man who'd saved a beggar child like him from the street, raised him, and taught him cultivation, would harm him. So…his teacher must've tried to run away because this wicked man had frightened him.

Song Qingshi felt helpless to explain, but before he could even try, Qingluan rose from the ground slowly, walked to Minghong, and slapped him across the face.

"Don't call that beast your shifu anymore!" she shrieked.

The slap sent Minghong to the floor. He cradled his cheek. Had his gentle martial sister, who'd taken care of him since he was young, really done this?

Tears flowed from Qingluan's eyes. She stared at him for a while, then started to disrobe.

"Jiejie, are you crazy? There are men here! What are you doing?!" Minghong yelped.

But Song Qingshi had already looked away politely. Qingluan turned around, swept her long hair off her back, and revealed the life seal to Minghong.

"What…is this?" he asked.

Qingluan spoke evenly. "Xie Que said we'd go to the School of Melody in a few days to learn the qin. That was a lie. This seal makes us

livestock. He already sold us to Bright Moon Pavilion. Ming Hong, do you know what they do at Bright Moon Pavilion?”

Minghong shook his head, a vague sense of fear creeping up his throat.

“It’s the largest brothel in the immortal realm,” she spat. Her voice had a shrill, self-deprecating tone, but tears still streamed down her cheeks. “Qingluan-jiejie’s going to be a whore who laughs and sings for money. Minghong, you know what a prostitute is? They’re sluts who wait on men day and night, using their bodies to please them in bed!”

“N-no. No way.” Minghong kept shaking his head. His entire body was trembling.

“Why not?” Qingluan draped her robes around her shoulders and approached him. “Silly boy. Do you understand that this is a fate I bargained for by pretending to be sweet and docile? At least Bright Moon Pavilion has rules. If I end up with them, I won’t suffer *too* much! Ha. I tried to get on that bastard’s good side just so I could be turned into an indecent woman. Isn’t it *funny*? But don’t feel sorry for me. You don’t even know what’s waiting for you!”

Minghong stared in fear at the crazed Qingluan, tears nearly spilling from his eyes. Qingluan, on the other hand, was already sobbing as she reached for him and caressed his beautiful face.

“Minghong, he liked you because you look like Wuhuan-ge. Wuhuan-ge wasn’t ungrateful. He went to that hell, Golden Phoenix Mountain. That’s why he can’t come back. They broke him. But what do you know? Golden Phoenix Mountain says they’d like another. And Shifu chose you.”

“Chose me for what?” Minghong asked.

Qingluan laughed coldly. “To serve. Just like me.”

“But I’m a man! How can I do that?”

Qingluan leaned down to whisper every detail into his ear.

Tears flowed down Minghong’s cheeks as he dry heaved, unable to take any more.

Song Qingshi did not stop her. These beautiful mortal children did not have the right to be naive.

After Qingluan had released some of her pain, she recovered her calm. She dragged the despondent Minghong in front of Song Qingshi and both of them made a deep bow, thanked him for saving them, and told him the location of Xie Que's interspatial pouch and his treasures.

Tens of thousands of spiritual crystals filled Xie Que's pouch. Song Qingshi also found a few account books, a thick contract book, and two life beads, one of which was Qingluan's.

There were tears of blood on every contract. Song Qingshi found the contract with Bright Moon Pavilion and gave it to Qingluan along with her life bead. Overcome with gratitude, she clutched them to her chest and began to cry again.

Song Qingshi also found Yue Wuhuan's name in the ledgers. One thousand five hundred mermaid pearls was all it took to destroy him.

He'd never known words could pierce his eyes to the point of pain…

Song Qingshi had wanted to leave after killing Xie Que. But when Minghong and Qingluan knelt before him, he felt like he was looking at Yue Wuhuan as he'd been many years ago. He couldn't bear to leave them. He ordered Qingluan to gather the others and tell them what Xie Que had done. If they wanted to return to mortal life, he'd send them back with a longevity elixir and they could consider this a brief trip to the immortal realm. If they had nowhere to go, the Medicine King's Valley would take them as servants, and they might join him in medical work.

Qingluan looked soft, but she worked fast. She gathered everyone in the field and showed them the truth, using her own life seal, her page in the account book, and her contract as proof. She even used the life bead to control another youth who had already been branded.

The children cried or threw up. It was chaos. The servants hadn't known either. They quivered in fear, and a few calm children led by Qingluan tried to comfort them.

Song Qingshi sat in the library alone, drafting a letter to Night Rain Pavilion with a request for Ye Lin to hire a boat from the Immortal Beast Sect. The Immortal Beast Sect were trustworthy couriers, if a little

expensive, but Xie Que's spiritual crystals would cover the cost. They'd ferry the children to the valley, and he'd figure out a place for them after that.

He sent the messenger bird on its way. He'd receive a reply by the next day at the earliest.

Song Qingshi couldn't resist writing to Yue Wuhuan as well. For a while, he held the brush ready but didn't know how to begin. He wrote, then rewrote, then crumpled the letter and tried again. Finally, he promised to return a day later, that he was safe, and that Yue Wuhuan needn't worry.

At nightfall, Qingluan took care of everything and told the children to pack their bags. Then she came to report to Song Qingshi.

He looked at the lanterns being lit all around Yan Mountain Sect and couldn't help but ask, "You've seen Wuhuan before, right?"

"Zunzhu, I was six when I arrived." She frowned, as though it took some effort to recall. "Wuhuan-ge left half a year later."

Song Qingshi gestured for her to sit. They stayed silent a little while, until Song Qingshi finally asked, "What do you remember about him?"

"I was too young to understand much. Wuhuan-ge was kind. He looked after new kids, taught us how to read and write…"

Song Qingshi listened intently, imagining the Yue Wuhuan she described, and copied down her recollections in his notebook.

"If he had something nice, he shared it with us. He never got mad when we did something wrong. He was smart. We all looked up to him. After he left, we were sad for a long time.

"Everyone liked to sneak peeks at him training because he was so pretty… He liked red. Most of his clothes were red. He sat on the wutong tree when he practiced his pieces. He played so well, birds landed to listen.

"Wuhuan-ge was the prettiest when he smiled. It was like all the light in the sky landed on him, so dazzling you couldn't look away."

Song Qingshi recorded everything without a word. That done, he started asking the questions in his book. "Do you know what Wuhuan likes to eat?"

“He wasn’t picky, but he liked to be clean.” Qingluan recalled an amusing incident. “He wouldn’t eat things someone already touched or anything that’d been dirtied. Even if it was just a cup of water, if someone else had touched it, he’d never drink from it. But he wouldn’t say so. He’d rather just suffer in silence. It took everyone so long to notice. He didn’t want others touching his stuff or sitting on his bed either. He wouldn’t get angry, but he’d secretly clean it afterward…”

So Yue Wuhuan’s compulsive neatness hadn’t started only after he’d dabbled in medicine. It probably made it harder to accept what had happened to him.

Song Qingshi stopped writing to think and suddenly remembered that Yue Wuhuan had drunk *his* water plenty of times and eaten *his* leftover food. Yue Wuhuan also didn’t mind when Song Qingshi entered his room or slept in his bed. What had changed? Or did Yue Wuhuan bear with it because he didn’t want to cause trouble? Song Qingshi would have to ask, in case he’d triggered Yue Wuhuan without even knowing.

“Do you know what else he likes?”

Qingluan thought and thought. Then she smiled. “Beautiful rocks.”

“Rocks?” Song Qingshi was shocked.

“Zunzhu, please follow me.”

Qingluan led Song Qingshi to a dusty storage room heaped with unwanted and forgotten things: a deflated ball, a broken swing, a stuffed tiger, calligraphy practice books, and other knickknacks. She rummaged through piles of junk for some time before finding an old wooden box she handed to Song Qingshi.

It was very simple, handmade, with a clumsy bird carved on the lid, and it held a few worthless but lovely rocks. There were pebbles flecked with gold, green-glazed stones, and a wondrous black rock patterned with a mountain and a river…

“There used to be more. Gems too,” Qingluan said sadly. “After Wuhuan-ge went away, they disappeared. This is all that was left. I was afraid that if he came back he wouldn’t be able to find them, so I hid the box here. Now I can return it.”

“This is his?” Song Qingshi held the lightweight box.

Qingluan nodded. “Once, I saw Wuhuan-ge picking rocks by the river. He probably sorted through thousands. Only the prettiest ones went in, and the box was full of colors. It was so pretty. When he noticed me, he seemed a little embarrassed, so he gave me some candy and made me promise not to tell.

“He kept it by his pillow and didn’t let anyone see it. Xie Que emptied it after he left. I thought Wuhuan-ge wouldn’t leave behind something so special, so I started to suspect. I tried to learn where he’d gone and eventually found out that he’d been sold as a slave…”

Song Qingshi felt the box in his hand was heavier than he first thought. So heavy, his heart ached. He turned to leave.

“Zunzhu,” Qingluan called. She wiped away her tears, smiled, then bowed. “Thank you. I’m so happy he’s alive… He’s a good person. He deserves to be treated well. Zunzhu, you like him a lot, right?”

“Like him?” Song Qingshi asked, stunned.

“You do things like that for the person you like!”

Song Qingshi’s mind scrambled to process her words. Of course he liked Yue Wuhuan. The system had sent Song Qingshi to complete a task, but at some point, he’d stopped thinking of this world as fiction. He treated Yue Wuhuan well by instinct, like it was carved into his bones. He wanted to give him the world, to see him happy, to know that he’d forgotten pain.

But the “like” that Qingluan spoke of and the “like” that Song Qingshi had previously understood were completely different.

He didn’t know what it meant to like someone in *that* way. Was it a reaction to increased levels of phenethylamine? Medical books said phenethylamine stimulated the nerves, causing your heart to beat faster and your face to heat up. Side effects included making you biased and stubborn, unable to judge clearly…

He didn’t think his judgment was affected. He was a doctor treating a patient. A doctor shouldn’t harbor thoughts about anything but his patient’s care. Anything else was unprofessional and immoral.

Song Qingshi walked to the river, lost in thought. Kneeling on the river bank, he took in the sight of all the rocks. He picked up one after another. He looked at thousands, but none were worthy of Wuhuan.

He had plenty of time to keep looking.

Chapter 30

IN THE MORNING, the message bird arrived, followed by a dragon elephant pulling an airborne boat.

Song Qingshi signed the Immortal Beast Sect's shipping contract. After settling Qingluan and the children on the boat, he ascended on his own spirit beast. Yan Mountain Sect lay empty below him. The red lotus bloomed in his palm, and a fierce flame bore down on this abyss of sin.

They flew slowly. It would take about three days to reach the Medicine King's Valley.

All Song Qingshi could think of was Yue Wuhuan, and he couldn't wait to return. He left a few instructions with Qingluan and parted ways with the convoy of children. His detour took him through several cities and cost some time. Though he hurried, by the time he reached the Medicine King's Valley, it was nearly eleven o' clock at night—too late, he feared.

He rushed to find Yue Wuhuan, but Yue Wuhuan found him first.

Song Qingshi let out a sigh of relief. "I thought you'd already gone to bed."

"You said you'd be back today, Zunzhu," Yue Wuhuan said, smiling. "I couldn't sleep, so I waited up for you."

"It's good you're still awake. Follow me."

Song Qingshi didn't think too much of it. He and Yue Wuhuan mounted the spirit beast and flew into the sky. Yue Wuhuan seemed a little surprised by the sudden trip but reassured Song Qingshi all was well.

"Zunzhu, your mice are fine, and the farms are thriving."

"No business!" Song Qingshi beamed. "I want to take you somewhere beautiful."

He flew toward the highest peak in the Medicine King's Valley, Xinyi Mountain. People rarely ascended Xinyi, so the slopes were quiet. Duruo Pavilion sat at the summit. Song Qingshi sometimes rested in the pavilion, lost in thought, staring out over the valley at the marvelous flowers in

spring, roaring waterfalls in summer, red leaves filling the sky in autumn, and fat drifts of snow in winter. All emerged partway from the banks of fog as though half realized, too stunning to be real. At night, this was the only place in the valley untouched by mist, which meant it was the best place to watch the stars.

He'd wanted to bring Yue Wuhuan here long ago, but circumstances meant he'd never gotten the chance. The sky was clear, and the stars twinkled. This night was perfect for a celebration.

Yue Wuhuan hesitantly followed Song Qingshi into the pavilion. He and Song Qingshi sat very close on the long stone bench. His heart thumped a little too fast, and he felt giddy. All the stars in the sky paled in comparison to the man at his side. Song Qingshi snapped his fingers and the lanterns hanging in the pavilion illuminated. Soft light enveloped the two of them.

"I have three gifts for you," he said earnestly.

Yue Wuhuan's heart raced. He could already guess one of them.

Song Qingshi pulled his hand toward him, spreading his fingers. He placed a dark, glittering stone the color of the night sky in his palm, then held his hand tightly. The rock connected their palms together.

Yue Wuhuan had seen countless treasures. He recognized the stone.

"This is…spirit essence?" he asked in disbelief. *This* was where the twenty thousand spiritual crystals had gone. It was a gift so precious, he didn't know what to say.

"It is," Song Qingshi said. "Will you show me your life bead? Close your eyes and relax. This might hurt a little bit."

Song Qingshi called forth his powers and wove lines of spiritual power over the spirit essence. They crossed and twined together to form runes. He pushed them through the spirit essence, deep into Yue Wuhuan's soul. They rushed to the chains that bound him, eating at them until they crumbled away.

Yue Wuhuan's hands burned, and his back felt even hotter, but it did not hurt. If there was flame, it only lapped at him until it had scoured the mark that reined his pride and branded him as livestock. Cool comfort

followed the burning sensation. The spell crumbled, his life bead disintegrated to dust, and he felt like his soul had been freed. Spiritual power welled up in his dantian and battered at his thin meridians. Power rushed through them like water out of a broken dam until, finally, it calmed.

He opened his eyes. That was all it had taken to free him from the shackles he carried. Just like a dream.

Song Qingshi let go of his hand. “It worked, right? Can I see?”

Yue Wuhuan looked at him deeply, then opened up his robes and turned around.

The bewitching mark that curled over his back had disappeared completely, exposing the small, red, phoenix-shaped birthmark on his left shoulder blade.

Song Qingshi poked the little phoenix. “Your birthmark is so cute.”

“Mn.” Yue Wuhuan’s ears felt a little hot. Afraid that Song Qingshi would notice, he hurried to dress again and used the lock bug to siphon away the embarrassment reddening his skin. After adjusting his breathing, he bowed low to Song Qingshi. He didn’t speak. Some debts didn’t require words; you repaid them over a lifetime.

“Don’t thank me! It’s so embarrassing. I promised to do this ages ago. I’m so sorry it took this long.” Song Qingshi pulled Yue Wuhuan upright. “I have another gift for you. You’ll like it.”

He took a soul lantern from his interspatial pouch. Inside the lantern’s eerie blue flame, there was a soul writhing in pain.

Yue Wuhuan accepted the lantern, his eyes widening in disbelief. “This is Xie Que?”

“I killed him, then locked his soul inside,” Song Qingshi said with a nod.

Those trapped in soul lanterns would never find peace. It was what cultivators in the immortal realm did to their greatest enemies.

Yue Wuhuan’s breathing quickened. “Why?”

“He’s the source of all your hatred and pain.” Song Qingshi took a while to consider the rest of his words. “I’m slow. It’s hard for me to

understand how other people feel. When you need to relieve your anger, take it out on him. And if you're someday able to let go of your hatred and pain, shatter the lantern. I'll understand."

"You'll understand?"

Song Qingshi chuckled. "It will mean you're free from the shackles of your past and can have a better life."

Yue Wuhuan clutched the soul lantern in his hand and stared longingly at Song Qingshi's smile. He felt like he'd never let go of his hatred.

"I should've killed Jin Feiren too, but we're at similar levels of cultivation, and rumor has it that there are fenshen cultivators at Golden Phoenix Mountain, so I'm not confident I could do it."

He'd given it a lot of thought, but Jin Feiren's wallet made an excellent shield. An entourage surrounded him whenever he left the mountain, and he carried countless defensive artifacts. Song Qingshi could have poisoned him in secret, but it was unlikely to work.

Song Qingshi didn't fear death; he feared that after he died, the Medicine King's Valley would fall to Jin Feiren, and Yue Wuhuan with it.

"Don't do anything to Jin Feiren!" Yue Wuhuan grabbed him in alarm. "Golden Phoenix Mountain has not one fenshen cultivator, but *three*. I've seen them with my own eyes. Jin Feiren has the upper hand with poison too. He has too many antidotes and artifacts. It's enough that you killed Xie Que. Don't risk yourself."

"Mm." Song Qingshi prodded the soul in the lantern. "Smack him around when you're upset. What a good stress toy."

Yue Wuhuan looked at the soul lantern, smiling, and said, "All right."

He would treasure this lantern—maybe too much. He'd take care of it daily and make sure nothing damaged it.

Song Qingshi scratched his head. "The last gift is a little plain after all that."

"I'm satisfied already." Yue Wuhuan smiled. He didn't know what else he could want.

Song Qingshi carefully brought out the old wooden box with a bird carved into it and placed it in front of him. Yue Wuhuan reached for it with trembling hands.

When he was six, he'd begged his older brother to help make the box. His family gave him gems to fill it, and after he arrived in the immortal realm, he added stones. He feared other people would find it childish and kept it a secret up to the day he lost everything. After he went to Golden Phoenix Mountain, he had no idea where the box ended up. He forgot it in that hell.

He never expected to see it again.

Yue Wuhuan stroked the inelegant carving on the lid and opened the box.

Pearls, sapphires, rubies, and diamonds filled the box, even the stones he'd collected from the mountain and riverside. He turned each beautiful rock in his hand, one by one, until he held a smooth, white pebble.

"I don't have money." The state of the Medicine King's Valley's coffers still shamed Song Qingshi. "I saw so many gems from the immortal realm in the cities. They're beautiful, but I couldn't afford them. So I just bought these mortal gems. At least they fill the box. I can get better ones in the future."

They weren't worthy of Yue Wuhuan's beauty. He should have bought flame stone or blood jade, but he'd had to use the windfall from Xie Que to repay Ye Lin and the Pavilion of Heavenly Crafts. He spent what little was left on the stones.

"I already have the best," Yue Wuhuan said. He pulled Song Qingshi into a tight embrace.

He recognized that the white pebble came from a river on Ruoxu Peak. It was still the tiniest bit wet, which meant it had been put in recently. It was incredibly difficult to find such a smooth, pure white stone, and Song Qingshi's robes were slightly muddy. He must've stood in the water for a long time, looking for the right one. The lock bug wriggled in Yue Wuhuan's neck, struggling with the abrupt flood of emotion.

"I want to give you everything," he said, and let out a noise that Song Qingshi couldn't decipher. He could not speak the other words.

The first gift is my body.

The second, my soul.

The third is my heart…

I’m yours, forever.

Song Qingshi raised his hands and swung them in time with the countdown. His red lotus blaze popped and sparkled in the air like splendid fireworks, lighting up the entire valley. He stood under the fireworks and gave Yue Wuhuan his most heartfelt wish.

“Happy birthday, Wuhuan.”

Chapter 31

THIS FIRST BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION had been a little too rushed.

Song Qingshi still felt embarrassed. His family always celebrated his birthday with a party, a three-tier cake, imported chocolate desserts, and mountains of gifts. His sister spoiled him in particular. She showered him with presents: a computer, luxury brand clothes, pricey medical equipment. His mother held a concert just for him every year, and his father donated to charities in his name—he'd even gifted his son's school a new lab once. Their chef made Song Qingshi longevity noodles, and the maid gave him a handmade doll. The servants drew him cute cards and wished him health and happiness. Even though he spent his last birthday bedbound, the celebration had been a hundred times better than this.

Song Qingshi hadn't prepared food, a card, a cake, or expensive gifts…

He'd promised to get rid of Yue Wuhuan's life seal a long time ago. Xie Que's soul was too wretched to even be considered a gift. Yue Wuhuan owned the wooden box to begin with. Song Qingshi had only added a few rocks from the mortal world, none of them worth much. It was only a plaything to entertain a child.

The more Song Qingshi thought about it, the worse he felt. He shot a few more blossoms of flame in the air, hoping to recreate the birthday atmosphere the best he could. Then he reached into his interspatial pouch and pulled out a huge longevity peach.

"You're supposed to eat this on your birthday…" Song Qingshi's voice trailed off. He'd visited pastry shops in a few different towns before learning the immortal realm had no such thing as birthday cake, and he didn't have the time to make a custom order. The shop owner didn't dare refuse the unreasonable demands of a yuanying cultivator, so they'd recommended this peach instead. They told him it was for birthdays, so it served the same function as a birthday cake.

He hadn’t found anything like a birthday candle, so he summoned his own flames and crowned the peach with a tiny red lotus. He handed it to Yue Wuhuan.

“Make a wish, then blow out the flame. Your wish will come true.”

Yue Wuhuan had never heard of such a thing, but he accepted the peach with a smile. “Really?”

“Yes,” Song Qingshi answered firmly. This was something his parents had taught him. Every year, he wished for a healthy body. The results were a little different than he’d imagined, but his wish had been granted, in a way—he’d miraculously arrived in this world and started a whole new life.

Yue Wuhuan closed his eyes obediently. “I wish to spend my birthday with Zunzhu again next year.”

“You can’t say your wish out loud. You have to think it.” Song Qingshi had forgotten to tell him the rules. “Pick something else.”

It was easier if he couldn’t say it out loud. Yue Wuhuan made his impossible wish and blew on the fire atop the longevity peach.

Song Qingshi snuffed out the flame the moment Yue Wuhuan’s breath flickered past the red lotus. He wanted to make all of Yue Wuhuan’s wishes come true.

“Your birthday celebration was too simple this year!” Song Qingshi said. “Next year, I’ll make it much fancier. I’ll figure out how to bake and make you a huge cake with white frosting. And I’ll write your name with jam. I’ll buy you even more beautiful gems as a gift, and we’ll set off real fireworks.”

“You’ll be with me every year?” Yue Wuhuan asked, probing.

Song Qingshi responded without hesitation. “Every year!”

Yue Wuhuan knew Song Qingshi didn’t like to lie. He meant everything he said. Yue Wuhuan couldn’t stop himself from smiling. Crazed glee chased the darkness from his heart. This promise meant he could stay in the valley forever, make himself the most important person to Song Qingshi, and always be at his side. He hadn’t felt such happiness in years.

Song Qingshi felt his heart shudder, and he remembered what Qingluan had said:

“Wuhuan-ge was the prettiest when he smiled. It was like all the light in the sky landed on him, so dazzling you couldn’t look away.”

It was true. He was perfect when he smiled… Not even all the stars in the sky could outshine his light, and Song Qingshi really couldn’t look away.

His phenethylamine levels increased. He couldn’t seem to think calmly anymore. His heart hammered, and his face warmed. What was this? This wasn’t something a doctor should be feeling toward his patient. Song Qingshi tried to keep his breathing even, but he felt his spiritual power tremble, and his dantian ached.

Perhaps this body had developed some sort of condition?

Song Qingshi suppressed his discomfort, got his emotions under control, and forcefully stilled his soul’s shuddering.

He sensed Yue Wuhuan’s own power rushing wildly through his meridians. It seemed he was about to establish his foundation. Song Qingshi thrust a pill into Yue Wuhuan’s mouth and directed him to sit. The process wouldn’t trouble Yue Wuhuan, but Song Qingshi remained at his side (studying his own unsteady vital signs all the while).

They sat for over an hour, during which he checked himself over completely. He’d ruled out poison, but what else would cause such a strange sensation in his spiritual power?

At that moment, Yue Wuhuan opened his eyes. He had completed his foundation. Just as the heavens and humans were connected, so was his heart. He looked at the sky and unsheathed his sword warily.

Roiling black clouds covered the stars, swirling around a dark vortex filled with flashing lightning. He couldn’t believe his eyes. Those were… clouds of tribulation.

Cultivation went against the heavens. They had issued a deadly test: tribulation by lightning. It presented danger and opportunity both—survival refined your cultivation and strengthened your body.

Song Qingshi had faced the same test when he cultivated his golden core and when he achieved yuanying level. He was no stranger to such trials, but it was unheard of for foundation establishment to call for such an intense tribulation. It was only the first step to cultivation. Almost anyone could achieve it. Why did Yue Wuhuan need to face lightning? Were the heavens okay?!

This was the first time Yue Wuhuan had established a foundation. He was not prepared.

The first strike fell at the strength of a golden-core tribulation.

Yue Wuhuan met it with a thrust of his sword. The sword and lightning clashed, and a terrible sound pierced the air. Fragmented lightning danced around his blade, then darted for him—but despite his body's weakness, he withstood the strike. A streak of blood ran from the corner of his mouth. He glared at the rolling clouds.

These were not normal clouds of tribulation. It was malice from the heavens.

The second strike was more powerful than the first.

Song Qingshi flung all the artifacts, elixirs, medicines, and protective spells in his pouch at Yue Wuhuan with no regard for their price or rarity. A cultivation elixir would temporarily increase his cultivation, the heart-protection elixir would shield his vital organs, and the body elixir would help him heal quickly. So armed, Yue Wuhuan drew a defense array. With the help of the artifacts, he readied himself for the next bolt of lightning.

The third.

The fourth.

The fifth.

The sixth.

This was a nine-strike tribulation.

The lightning pummeled Yue Wuhuan again and again. His sword shattered, and his reserve of magical items disintegrated. Medicine and arrays still protected him, but he stood by will alone. His body was already injured beyond recognition, charred from head to toe, but he faced the sky and laughed maniacally.

“If you want to ruin me, go ahead! Come on, destroy me! I’m waiting for you!”

Song Qingshi’s yuanying energy trembled harder and harder. Each jolt forced a gasp from his mouth, but he dared not lose sight of Yue Wuhuan for even a second.

The seventh strike.

The eighth.

It broke the array, and Yue Wuhuan fell to the ground again. He tried to rise, but the clouds of tribulation surged forward and readied their final strike. Only a yuanying tribulation would call such furious lightning. Yue Wuhuan was certain, then, that the heavens had never planned on even giving him a chance. He would die today.

“Why?” he murmured to himself, staring up at the lightning-filled sky. “Am I not even worthy of living?”

No matter how hard a foundation-level cultivator struggled, they couldn’t withstand the final strike intended for the yuanying level. This trial had already broken all the rules. Nothing like it had happened before, nor would it again.

Yue Wuhuan understood at last. He laughed as he looked at the clouds above.

“You’d break all the heavenly laws just to end me now? This is beyond hatred… There must be a reason you want to kill me at the foundation stage. Are you *afraid* of me?”

The heavens roared, and lightning fell.

Yue Wuhuan stood with the last of his strength. He stared into the blinding light, his gaze full of rage, daring death to strike. Looking back on his life, he didn’t know what he’d done to deserve heaven’s wrath. Why had it taken everything from him? He had finally crawled out of hell and experienced a little bit of comfort, but even that was too much. Now his life would be snatched away.

He wasn’t scared to die. He only regretted that he couldn’t spend his next birthday with Song Qingshi.

A red and black lotus bloomed before Yue Wuhuan as Song Qingshi leaped into the air and lightning crashed against his fated weapons. He'd realized there was something wrong with this tribulation and wanted to help, but his involvement would only have made the lightning stronger, along with Yue Wuhuan losing all the benefits of surviving the ordeal. Song Qingshi had waited until the last strike formed until he intervened, but he'd never expected it would be as powerful as a yuanying tribulation—or stronger.

Lightning tore Song Qingshi's two lotuses to shreds and coursed forward. All he could do was block it with his body.

His silk spiritual robes disintegrated, and his spiritual power twisted and burned. The left half of his body went numb. He fell from the air like a leaf from a tree and crumpled in Yue Wuhuan's arms.

Law governed heaven and earth once more, and the clouds of tribulation unwillingly dispersed. Yue Wuhuan stared down at the limp body in his arms.

Please! This isn't the ending I want! His heart reeled from a blow not even the lock bug could cushion, and his breathing grew erratic.

"D-don't be sad." Sensing his state, Song Qingshi struggled to muster the last of his strength and force the words from his burned throat. His grasp on consciousness slipped.

Wuhuan, did you hear me?

Chapter 32

IT WAS IMPORTANT for doctors to stay calm when faced with complicated, dangerous, or urgent cases.

The clouds had passed. Twinkling stars dotted the sky once more.

Emergency medicine was a race against time, so Yue Wuhuan couldn't spare a second to wallow in his pain. He cradled Song Qingshi against his chest and rushed back to the Medicine King's Valley.

Yue Wuhuan first stabilized Song Qingshi's vitals with a protective golden-lotus elixir from the treasury. Next, he installed his patient in the hidden room beneath Song Qingshi's quarters, which was sometimes used for isolated cultivation. A pile of ancient tomes he hadn't finished studying sat next to a medicinal hot-spring pool with healing properties.

Song Qingshi had previously bathed here, but he'd found the pool cramped and had abandoned it after creating a larger one outside his rooms. Yue Wuhuan discovered it by accident while cleaning. Hundreds of years had passed since its last use, so no one else in the Medicine King's Valley knew it existed.

Song Qingshi's injuries needed to be kept secret. The valley's safety and the safety of the man himself depended on it.

Yue Wuhuan redirected hot water to the bath once again, stripped Song Qingshi's tattered clothing, and lowered him into the water. His frail, thin, pale body was covered in large, shocking patches of burns. The lightning had charred his left side and shredded his meridians. Yue Wuhuan imagined how much it must've hurt the moment the strike had hit Song Qingshi.

No matter how slim his chances of survival, he hadn't hesitated to act. Before he lost consciousness, he'd even used all his spiritual powers to lock the flames of the underworld inside himself to keep them from spreading and causing damage. This had made it impossible for his body to heal itself, though yuanying cultivators could normally do so.

Yue Wuhuan finished examining Song Qingshi and watched him drift in the pool. Despair gripped him. He reached for all he had learned and tried to stay calm. Adding soul-gathering powder and a potion of bone regeneration to the water should help Song Qingshi stabilize. It would at least keep him alive…

Good thing Yue Wuhuan had studied hard. The medicines worked. Song Qingshi's condition improved, but his two fated weapons had been damaged, which also harmed his yuanying. He didn't wake.

After completing all his tasks, Yue Wuhuan finally let himself feel sorrow.

He stared at Song Qingshi floating in the water. He'd heard many terrifying rumors about the Medicine King: His unbelievably powerful lotuses of flame could reduce mountains to a heap of ash and exterminate entire sects, or he could disintegrate a cultivator with a snap of his fingers. But the man before him was kind and gentle. Song Qingshi was the greatest good Yue Wuhuan had ever known, but heaven itself had punished him for that transgression. Now he was so fragile he'd shatter at a single touch, like a cracked porcelain vessel.

Yue Wuhuan loathed this putrid world and the unjust heavens, but he hated his own uselessness even more. His heart grew bitter and pain coursed through his body.

He wanted to destroy everything…

His breath quickened. He felt himself begin to spiral.

But he *couldn't.* Yue Wuhuan knew he was losing control of his emotions. He breathed deep and tried to use the calming techniques Song Qingshi taught him. He used the lock bug to soothe his fury and his ever-present desire to die.

At that moment, he remembered Song Qingshi's promise.

"Everything you once had, I'll find and return to you. I'll give you everything you've longed for."

He hadn't understood then, but he did now. The promise included his life. The more Yue Wuhuan understood, the harder he fell.

Here he was, a demon who'd crawled out of hell cloaked in sheep's clothing, daring to dream of luxuries he didn't deserve. He wanted to taint the world's purest existence with his body's filth.

I'm so disgusting.

Yue Wuhuan closed his eyes, not daring to think about it any longer. He knelt by the pool and brought Song Qingshi's uninjured hand piously toward his lips.

"Qingshi, don't be afraid. There are many medical books in the Medicine King's Valley. I will stop at nothing to learn.

"Qingshi, don't be afraid. I'll protect the Medicine King's Valley. It won't come to harm.

"Qingshi, don't be afraid. I'll protect your little white mice.

"Qingshi, don't be afraid. I won't give up on life."

Yue Wuhuan's eyes were open, and he was crying in his heart, but there were no tears. His body ached, but he could no longer feel it. Blood dripped from the cut on his forehead like the tears he couldn't shed, sliding down his cheeks, drop by drop. They spattered the back of Song Qingshi's hand, staining him.

This filthy red…

Yue Wuhuan wanted to wipe it away. But if his touch was gentle, it might not be enough, and if it was too hard, it might disturb Song Qingshi's sleep.

Yue Wuhuan lowered his head and pressed his burning lips against Song Qingshi's cool skin. He kissed the back of his hand, then slid downward and sucked each finger into his mouth one by one before reluctantly letting them go. He kissed every inch of him until it was spotless.

When Yue Wuhuan was done, he locked his longing inside the cage of his heart. That was it. He would not cross the line.

Tightly holding the hand of the one dearest to him, he swore the most important oath he'd make in his life:

"I'll cure you, Qingshi."

BEICHUAN, ZHENHE CITY, CANTONG SECT.

Zhenhe City was a faraway little city, and the Cantong Sect was a subdivision of the Religion of Joy. Their head, Guiyuan-xianzun, had already reached yuanying, and he ran the brothel and gambling house in Zhenhe City. He seemed rather suave, with foxy eyes and a smile for everyone, but was actually quite ruthless and cruel. In the city, no one dared cross him.

After tonight, Guiyuan-xianzun would never smile again.

A tide of terrifying insects swept across the sky, followed by the floors and walls, enveloping the entire Cantong Sect and killing everyone in its path.

An Long sat in an armchair with his lips pressed tightly together. His long eyes glinted with a violent light as he dangled a wine cup in one hand. He appraised the scenery around him with great interest, including the beauty who'd just tumbled out of Guiyuan-xianzun's bed and was now kneeling at An Long's feet.

The man was in a state of undress, and his legs trembled as he hurried to replenish An Long's wine. He didn't dare look over his shoulder at his master behind him.

Guiyuan-xianzun was drowning in the mountain of insects, his body numbed and locked in place. His bloodshot eyes bulged as he longed to ask why An Long had come to kill him, but all that emerged from his mouth was a horrendous centipede. His moans were choked and desperate.

An Long could tell what his victim wanted. He chuckled. "Curious why I'm here?"

Broken, guttural noises came from Guiyuan-xianzun as he nodded his head desperately.

"You saw what I did that day on the mountain, right?" An Long spoke as though in idle conversation, but he wore a devilish smirk. "You've never done wrong by me, but I can't be caught doing something so embarrassing."

He'd murdered the entire sect over an embarrassment?

Guiyuan-xianzun could have wept blood. He'd thought of many reasons the Xilin Poison King might kill him but none so inconsequential! He hadn't even made anything of it!

But the Xilin Poison King was a vicious wolf. He didn't act by common sense or reason. He had grown up surrounded by murder, knowing he must devour others if he wanted to live.

An Long slurped the last of the wine in his cup and waved a hand disinterestedly. The insects severed Guiyuan-xianzun's neck. Then they swarmed him, and soon even his body was gone.

The shaky little beauty filled An Long's cup again. He had thrown a few suggestive looks, knowing the Poison King's rumored preference for beauties, but thanks to his fear, it looked more like he had an eyelid cramp.

An Long thought it was hilarious. Since he hadn't yet finished all the wine in the jar, he didn't quite want to go.

"Hey, pretty thing. What's your name?" he asked with a smile that revealed one sharp canine.

The beauty forced a smile. "Siyao."

"Oh? Good name." An Long leaned in to peer at his clean, white hands. "'Yao' as in medicine? What does a little thing like you have to do with that?"

"My father was an apothecary," Siyao answered carefully.

"You don't want revenge for your ex-lover?"

Siyao smiled and didn't look back. "Xianzun, you must be joking. How could that man be considered a lover?"

"When I showed up, you were screaming with joy. Seems like you had all sorts of pet names. How isn't he your lover?"

"I belong to the South Wind Pavilion." Siyao tried his best to stay calm. He didn't know what this brute wanted to hear, but the plain truth might suffice. "I sell my body. Whoever gives me money is my darling, my beloved."

The frank answer gave An Long pause. Soon he burst out laughing. "Good, good, good!"

Siyao continued to try to get into his good graces. “I can call you darling or beloved too, even if you don’t give me money. Zunzhu’s awfully handsome.”

An Long considered Siyao’s elegant features and the single thin, white robe he wore. He wound a strand of Siyao’s long hair around his finger and tugged. An Long seemed to be thinking.

“If only he was so willing to become my beloved,” he mumbled after a long silence. “I lack anything but money…”

Siyao didn’t know what he meant, so he kept quiet.

An Long yanked him by the hair. “Do you think there are a lot of fake people in this world?”

“Yes,” Siyao said, wincing.

“How would I find one?”

“As long as you have money, power, strength, or beauty, they’re everywhere.”

“Well said! Just what I like to hear!” An Long was satisfied, so he released Siyao. “Who needs love? He just needs to want my money, my power, my strength, and my looks. And I can be good to him…”

Siyao was baffled. “Xianzun cares for this person so sincerely. Who wouldn’t fall for you?”

“He won’t.” An Long drank the last of the wine. He felt a little tipsy, at last, and took his time standing up. He pressed a finger to Siyao’s forehead and stared dazedly at that frail, white silhouette, a hint of despair flashing in his eyes. A moment later, he couldn’t help but laugh at his own expense. “He cultivates emptiness.”

Five hundred years ago, he’d already known it was hopeless. The one he wanted had emptied himself of emotions, of desire. An attachment would squander all that cultivation.

He would never have the love he yearned for. He would never have his heart.

An Long used a lock bug to calm his nearly uncontrollable greed and malice.

A minuscule insect appeared at his fingertip before it penetrated Siyao’s forehead like a pinprick of light.

“Because of your name, and because your answer pleased me…”

Empty of memory or thought, Siyao toppled over.

An Long strode outside, and the waves of insects receded. A white snake spattered with blood slithered through the tangle of bodies, then climbed onto his arms and shoulders. It wound itself around him and turned its head disdainfully as if ignoring him.

He patted Haolong’s head.

“All right, all right. I’ll write to Little Qingshi and beg him not to be angry anymore. Hmm. Should we send him something fun? I heard the secret realm of Yunling opens soon. There’s some interesting herbs there. Shall we pick some for him?”

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
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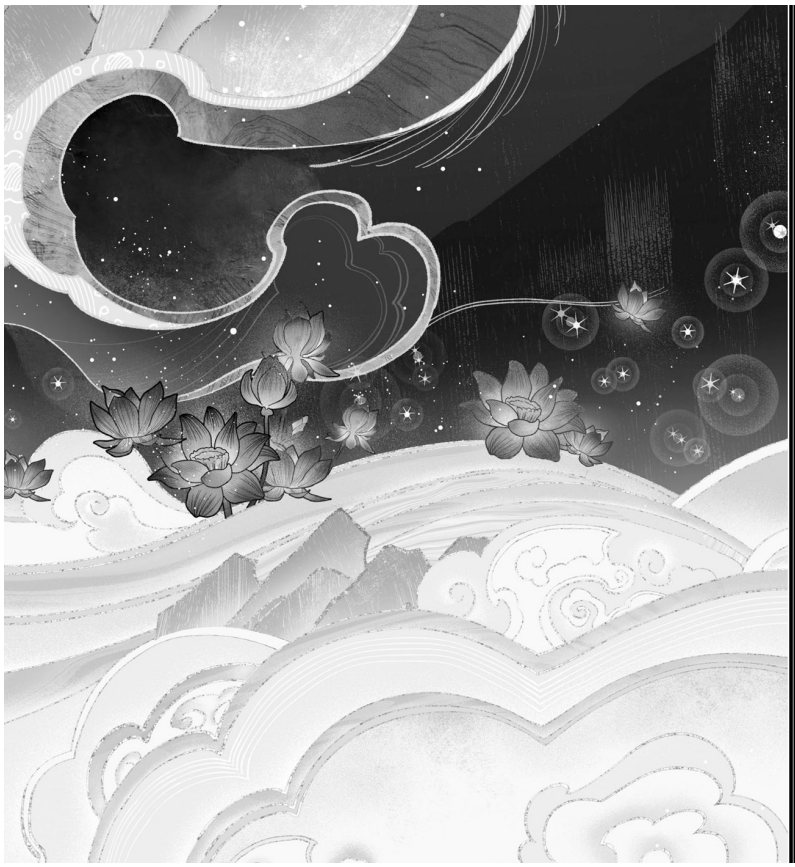
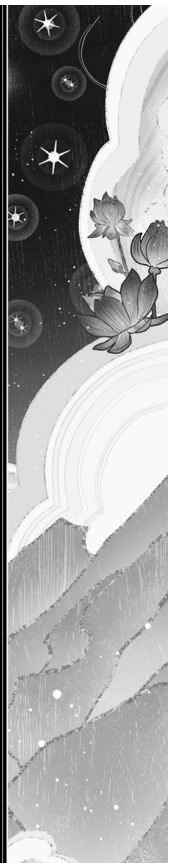


CHARACTER GUIDE & GLOSSARY



CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

SONG QINGSHI 宋清时 (Qingshi: “Peaceful times”): A medical student who died from ALS, only to be transmigrated to a novel where he was tasked by the mysterious System to save the main character from a tragic fate.

YUE WUHUAN 越无欢 (Wuhuan: “Absence of joy”): A royal prince who was taken from the mortal realm under false pretenses and enslaved. Song Qingshi mistakes him for the main character in need of rescue.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

AN LONG 安龙: A man who appears to be Song Qingshi’s only friend. The master of the Thousand Poison Sect.

HAOLONG/XIAOBAI 皓龙/小白: An Long’s pet snake. Song Qingshi once saved its life, but because he refused to keep it as a pet, An Long became its owner instead.

JIN FEIREN 金斐韧: The sadistic, wealthy master of Golden Phoenix Mountain. Yue Wuhuan’s former owner.

MO YUAN 墨渊: A legendary mortal referred to as the “sword master” who cultivated to the yuanying level and created a new style of swordplay.

XIE QUE 谢缺: A cultivator who seeks out beautiful mortal children to train as cultivators until he sells them as slaves.

YE LIN 叶霖: The master of the Night Rain Pavilion, an establishment that posts bounties and sells secrets and information.

NAME GUIDE

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

-ER: Affectionate diminutive. A suffix meaning “son” or “child.” Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

Family

GE/GEGE: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: A word meaning “elder sister.” It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

Cultivation and Tutelage

XIANZUN: A respectful way to refer to another cultivator.

XIANZHANG: A respectful way to refer to another cultivator.

SHIXIONG/SHIJIE: One’s older peer. Shixiong is one’s older brother, while Shijie is one’s older sister.

ZHENREN: A title for Daoist masters.

ZHUANGZHU: The master of an estate.

XIANREN: A respectful way to refer to another cultivator, usually one who has ascended to immortality.

ZUNZHU: A respectful term of address for the master of a sect, estate, etc.

Other

GONGZI: Title for young men, especially those of high status.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As

Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names and sounds from the world of *Mistakenly Saving the Villain.*

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NOTE ON SPELLING

Romanized Mandarin Chinese words with identical spelling in pinyin —and even pronunciation—may well have different meanings. These words are more easily differentiated in written Chinese, which uses logographic characters.

Sòng Qīngshí

Song as in **sown** with a **g** at the end,

or if “song” was pronounced with a **long ō**

Q as in **ch**ange, ing as in **Eng**lish

Shi as in **she**

Yuè Wúhuān

Yu as in **you**, e as in m**eh**

W as in **wh**at, u as in **oo**f

H as in **h**orse, uan as in **wan**t

Ān Lóng

An as in **un**derstand

Long as in **loan** with a **g** at the end,

or if the word “long” was pronounced with a **long ō**

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

GLOSSARY

ACUPOINTS: Specific spots on the meridians of the body that are said to stimulate the central nervous system in various ways.

CULTIVATION/CULTIVATORS: Cultivation is the means by which mortals with spiritual aptitude develop and harness supernatural abilities. The practitioners of these methods are called cultivators. The path of one's cultivation is a concept that draws heavily from Daoist traditions.

There are different stages of cultivation, often differing between books. The ones for *Mistakenly Saving the Villain* are:

Qi Gathering: The beginner stage when the cultivator collects spiritual energy from the environment around them.

Foundation Establishment: The next stage of cultivation. The cultivator cycles spiritual energy and develops their strength.

Core Formation: The stage when the cultivator forms a golden core and stops aging.

Yuanying: A powerful stage beyond core formation. This is Song Qingshi's level.

Fenshen: A greater level of cultivation that is rarely reached.

Heti: An even greater level of cultivation.

DANTIAN: Concentrations of spiritual power within the body.

DEMONIC CULTIVATOR: Evil cultivators who do not follow the same moral codes and practices that orthodox cultivators do.

MERIDIANS: The means by which qi travels through the body, like a magical bloodstream.

PILLS AND ELIXIRS: Medicines created by cultivators either using their spiritual powers, plants that have magical properties, or both.

SPIRIT BEAST: Animals with spiritual powers who often have higher intelligence but are not human or humanlike.

THE FIVE ELEMENTS: The five elements—metal, wood, water, fire, and earth—make up everything in the universe. A person's cultivation can also have a specific elemental attribute, and each element has different qualities (e.g. wood elementals have superior healing).

THE FIVE POISONS: Five deadly creatures treated as symbols of evil: snakes, scorpions, centipedes, toads, and spiders.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE (TCM): A holistic system of medicine used throughout most of Chinese history. Herbal and animal byproducts were boiled into decoctions or ground and applied as a poultice to treat injuries.

XIANXIA: A genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Some xianxia works focus on immortal beings such as gods or demons, whereas others are concerned with the conflicts of mortals who practice cultivation. In the latter case, characters strive to become stronger by harnessing their spiritual powers, and some aim to extend their lifespan or achieve immortality.

YAO: Animals and other creatures that have cultivated a human form.

YIN ENERGY AND YANG ENERGY: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including

spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever energy they lack.

About the Author

Feng Yu Nie is a signed Jinjiang author whose most famous works include Mistakenly Saving the Villain and Shizun. She’s a human being who loves life and spends a lowkey time on earth, appreciating cats, dogs, hamsters, little birds, traveling, good food, and sleeping in.

Footnotes

Chapter 2

[1] Xianzun is a term of address for a cultivator. Can be attached to someone’s family name or used alone as a title.

[2] A xiao is a vertical flute, a traditional Chinese instrument.

Chapter 3

[3] A guzheng is a traditional Chinese stringed instrument played by plucking.

Chapter 4

[4] Xianzhang is a term of address for a cultivator. Can be attached to someone’s family name or used alone as a title.

Chapter 7

[5] Zunzhu is a term of address for the leader of a sect. Can be used on its own or appended to a family name.

[6] Zongzi is a dish made of glutinous rice that is wrapped in layers of bamboo leaves and steamed.

Chapter 15

[7] Zhenren is a title used for Daoist masters.

[8] Xianren is a term of address for an accomplished cultivator, usually one who has ascended or reached immortality.

[9] Gege is a term of address for an older male, meaning older brother. Sometimes used flirtatiously.

Chapter 19

[10] Haolong—white dragon—is An Long's pet. It is sometimes referred to as Xiaobai—little white—as a nickname.

[11] The Five Poisons are five venomous or poisonous animals: snakes, scorpions, centipedes, toads, and spiders.

[12] Shizu is a term of address for the teacher of one's teacher.

Chapter 21

[13] Xianshi is a term of address for one's teacher who has passed away. It is similar to Laoshi; xian means previous.

Chapter 23

[14] Jianghu is an underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, artisans, and merchants who settle disputes between themselves per their own moral codes and are not governed by regular laws.

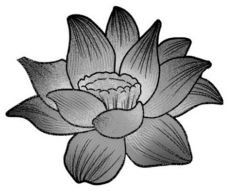
Chapter 28

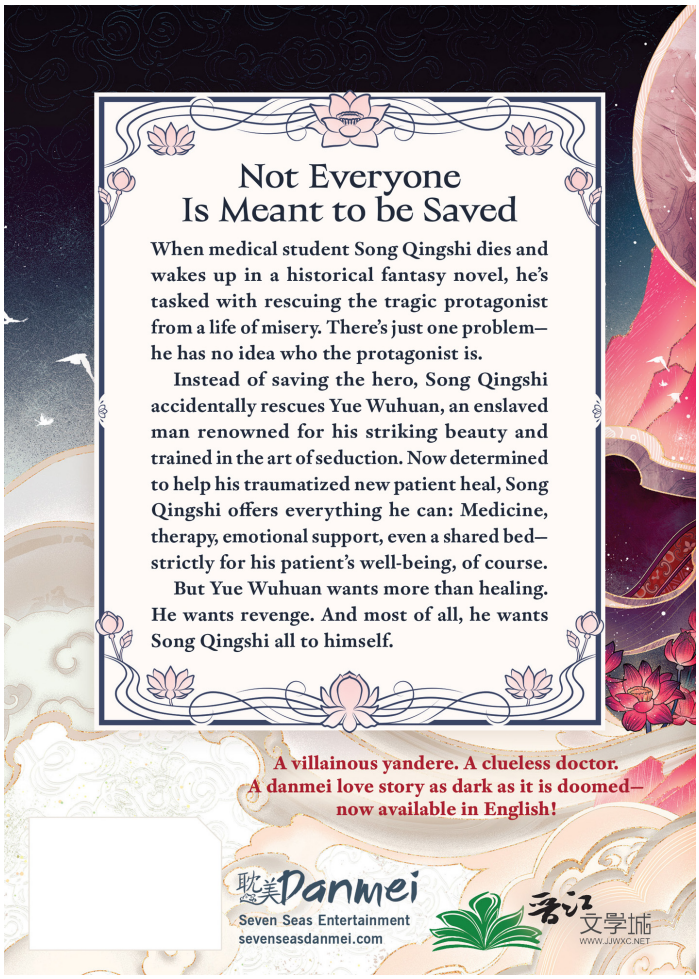
[15] Shixiong is a term of address for one's older male peer. Can be attached to someone's family name or used alone as a title.

[16] Er is a suffix that means son or child. Used as an affectionate diminutive.

Chapter 29

[17] Jiejie is a term of address for an older woman, meaning older sister.




Not Everyone
Is Meant to be Saved
When medical student Song Qingshi dies and wakes up in a historical fantasy novel, he's tasked with rescuing the tragic protagonist from a life of misery. There's just one problem—he has no idea who the protagonist is.
Instead of saving the hero, Song Qingshi accidentally rescues Yue Wuhuan, an enslaved man renowned for his striking beauty and trained in the art of seduction. Now determined to help his traumatized new patient heal, Song Qingshi offers everything he can: Medicine, therapy, emotional support, even a shared bed—strictly for his patient's well-being, of course.
But Yue Wuhuan wants more than healing. He wants revenge. And most of all, he wants Song Qingshi all to himself.

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